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Around Italy, Researchers Rally to Defend Science

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Italia Unita per la corretta informazione scientifica

Uphill battle. Scientists held a flash mob on the Spanish Steps in Rome.

Tourists visiting the famous Spanish Steps in Rome on Saturday were treated to an unusual spectacle: Some 30 researchers suddenly showed up, unfolded banners and placards in different languages, and stood motionless on the steps for several minutes. Their flash mob was part of an unprecedented series of events across Italy to protest what organizers say is an antiscientific attitude in Italy and widespread "misinformation" about science in the media.

Saturday's event, called Italy United for Correct Scientific Information [1], was organized by young researchers in response to an attack against an animal facility at the University of Milan in April, in which animal rights activists released mice and rabbits and ruined experiments [2]. Some 300 researchers had already demonstrated on 1 June in Italy to defend animal experimentation; the new protests, which included flash mobs and conferences in 15 cities, were aimed more broadly. "We want to show that we do not live in an ivory tower," says organizer Dario Padovan, a biologist at the University of Trieste. "We are not afraid to defend our research and understand the need of communicating it correctly."

Press coverage of April's attack showed again that in Italy, important scientific topics "are often addressed and reported by the media in a superficial, or even wrong, way" says Federico Baglioni, one of the organizers of Saturday's events. Previous examples were the conviction of Italian researchers [3] for their failure to warn about the risk of a deadly earthquake in L'Aquila and the recent debate about the Stamina Foundation [4], which offers stem cell therapies that many scientists say aren't scientifically proven. In such debates, Italian media tend to focus on the emotional side of the story and fail to delve into the scientific facts, Baglioni says.

"I don't think that the antiscientific trend is an Italian anomaly," says Paolo Bianco, a stem cell biologist at La Sapienza University in Rome and one of the speakers in that city's event. Animal rights protests have become more vociferous in many countries, for instance. "What is true is that our country has never had a scientific culture," Bianco says.

Organizers were worried that Saturday's protests might trigger violent reactions. In Trieste, a

planned gathering at a bookstore was moved to another venue at the last minute after the owners received threatening letters and e-mails. In Milan and Turin, plainclothes police officers were in the audience, ready to intervene if necessary. "It was the first time in my life that I had to chair a scientific event of this sort escorted by the police," says Daniela Ovadia, a science writer who was invited to moderate the event in Milan.

But the day passed without incident. Instead, there were "extremely stimulating and interactive discussions with the audiences," Baglioni says. To researchers' dismay, however, Italian media did not pay attention to their events. On the contrary: The only demonstration that made the news was a sit-in by animal rights activists in Milan organized in parallel.

Links:

- [1] <http://www.italiaxlascienza.it/eng/home.html>
- [2] <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/340/6131/412.2.summary>
- [3] <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/338/6106/451>
- [4] <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/340/6136/1028.summary>