

Reality science

Another panel reviewing grants. Hours of argument when, with the funding available, only the top-rated one will get funded. I sigh. Surely there might be other ways...

The darkness flickers with luminous green dialogues that I ignore for now. Frantic preparations always make me uncomfortable, so I let the signs drift around in the background while concentrating on settling my own dialogues into their allotted places. The sonorous voice of the compere grows in the centre field. A swirl of light streaks towards me from the distance, and within seconds coloured tracks engulf my vision, writhing arcs around my head and pulsing to some as yet barely audible beat. I draw back in alarm, my uniform of blue jeans wrinkling unpleasantly. So retro they had said admiringly as they brought me these clothes. So suited to the Science Evaluator Team. You wear them with such authority.

Now I let the blast of polytonal sound flare through my body, drawing my attention into the bid cast from the Bav-Cal-IIT (BCI) consortium. One of the vast multi-university conglomerates that continually does well at the “physical science panel show”, the BCI always provide a great spectacle to the public audience. Huge resources from the Indian Institutes of Technology, careful pragmatic approaches from the Bavarians, and maverick visionary entertainment from the Californians (hence “BCI”).

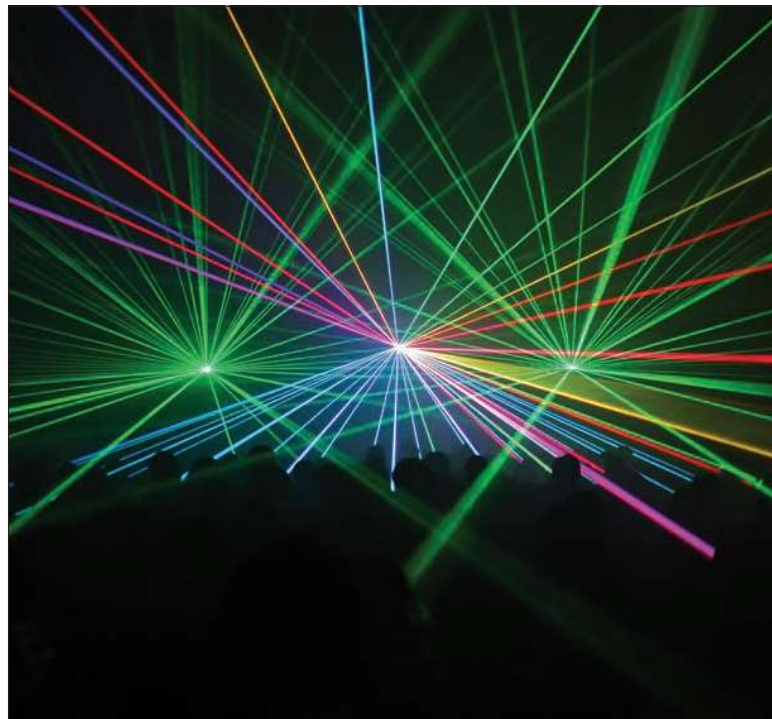
It was so often a winning formula for extracting research funds from The Pot. A narrator, delicate and smooth like gossamer cobwebs, floated over the introductory themes at the heart of their science case. I’d seen this style before so didn’t pay much attention. It was the way they translated the science case, which I’d pored over so carefully with my evaluator team, into a slick science sell that had to count for them.

They had only a few minutes to get across the themes for this decade-long science collaboration before drilling into the actual science. It was a bid I hadn’t been able to get excited about. Deep brain imaging had been around for many decades now, and the capability to follow billion-neuron thought-excitations was still pretty hit-or-miss. There was the physics-instrumentation part that needed a lot more careful development with the soft-electronics teams.

I admired the visuals, the spin of embedded wires in flesh and the play of coloured thoughts over their simulated mind-brain networks. They’d managed to translate some pretty complicated ideas into neat sequences, while skirting over the rather difficult dynamics problems, to give a good impression of what might come out of their project. Recently this approach had done well in the science evaluations, scoring strong funding.

Since The Pot was now the main world resource for growing new science, my role had become more upfront – not really to my liking. There were public airings over how biased my decisions had been against this or that team, even though I just steered the evaluators. The final evaluations, once we had approved the core proposals, were now public votes – reality science had taken hold. Science enthusiasts worldwide could feel they had a stake in what research was done.

The early stages were always the parts I liked – see-



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ing the university conglomerates settle into focused areas, and selecting the science bids they were going to favour this time round. There was a series of sweepstakes within the evaluator teams as to which warhorse themes were going to be taken out for a spin again. And it wasn’t always the established and successful university conglomerates where most science now got done, that fell into the trap of revisiting old dead themes.

I’d seen the politics inside these multinational science juggernauts, which captured their researchers’ group loyalty. It was understandable that they found it hard to escape the attraction of big glossy themes. Even the smaller emerging partnerships, such as the one now backed by a stable of industries from the South American bloc, had their eye on these big prizes. Of course, most of the conglomerates made their money selling newly minted technologies back to consortia of countries that then invested them in their new pet industries. It was hard to know where the big themes fitted into this economy, apart from attracting the upfront investment for science research. But their leadership was deadly focused on the competition and it didn’t pay to look like a small gnat in the jungle.

...Is this then a dystopia of how future science funding might look? Or a way to give a stake in its selection to the public who fund it? We have had a deeply settled system for many years, but there are many ways it could rapidly evolve. This is just one of many possible visions.



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