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The Establishment of Science Communication for the Public at the Royal Institution

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The Royal Institution was founded in 1799, the same year Napoleon came to power by coup d'état in France. Britain had good reason to fear invasion by their old enemy and was at the time very dependent on food imports. The initiative to create the RI was led by Joseph Banks, the then President of the Royal Society of London and Benjamin Thompson, an American who fled to England after picking the losing side in the War of Independence, and became amongst many other things the Bavarian Army Minister and a Count of the Holy Roman Empire. The mission of the RI was to be: “Diffusing the knowledge and facilitating the general introduction of useful mechanical inventions and improvements, and for teaching by courses of philosophical lectures and experiments, the application of science to the common purposes of life.” Much of its early activity was directed towards promoting innovation in the field of agriculture and the majority of its founding “Proprietors” were wealthy landowners. The teaching part of the Mission was led for over fifty years by two of the greatest scientists of their time Humphry Davy and Michael Faraday. Both of whom played a key role in adding “blue sky” as well as applied research to the RI's activities. This presentation will seek to combine an historical account of the RI with reflection on the perspective this provides on current initiatives at the science, innovation and society interfaces.