

What is science communication?



I. BASICS

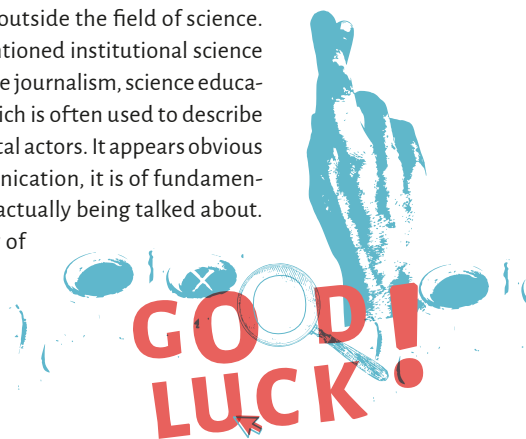
by DIRK HANS

A trivial question, you might think. Science communication is given when science communicates. But it is not quite that simple. Who communicates what, and to whom? Do scientists have to be involved, or is it enough if the content merely originates from science? Definitions remain inconsistent to this day. Bonfadelli et al. (2017), in their acclaimed edited volume *Forschungsfeld Wissenschaftskommunikation*, use the following definition: “We understand science communication as all forms of communication focused on scientific knowledge or scientific work, both inside and outside institutionalised science, including its production, content, use, and effects” (translated by author). Admittedly, this is an academically sophisticated definition, and one that can be confidently endorsed.

However, such definitions are often of little use, because they are simply too broad. Let’s take a look back in history to gain a better overview of the popular terms and their meanings. Traditionally, the term “science communication” was used primarily to distinguish it from “science journalism” in the sense of “institutional science communication”. It therefore encompassed all communication activities of scientific institutions or organisations (e.g. universities) towards a non-scientific public. This includes direct

communication by scientists, as well as mediated communication by the corresponding communications departments. In these cases, it is advisable to refer directly to “institutional science communication” in order to avoid misunderstandings. Currently, more and more experts are adding the term “science PR” (public relations) to the portfolio of terminology in order to make the immanent aspects of interest-driven communication, which is primarily aimed at building reputation, more transparent. This term is very helpful! And, to be straight, science PR is an important, sometimes dominant part of today’s institutional science communication. But there are many other actors who can also engage in science communication, such as smaller associations, teachers, or even private individuals who simply want to share their fascination with science. This type of science communication is non-institutional and often close to what we like to call “science education”.

And there is more. The dedicated exchange within the scientific community, such as at a scientific conference, is also often attributed to science communication. There are a number of helpful clarifications that we strongly recommend. In the latter example, we can speak of “internal science communication” or “scholarly communication”. Of course, the complementary terminology of “external science communication” can be used to make it clear that science is aimed at an audience outside the field of science. And, of course, we have the aforementioned institutional science communication and science PR, science journalism, science education and even knowledge transfer, which is often used to describe communication with industry or societal actors. It appears obvious that when discussing science communication, it is of fundamental importance to first clarify what is actually being talked about. In this book, we use the terminology of science communication (SciCom) in the broad sense, but we always try to add the necessary specificity.



Recommended reads:

- ◆ Bonfadelli et al. (2017), *Forschungsfeld Wissenschaftskommunikation*. Springer Verlag. ISBN:978-3-658-12898-2
- ◆ Cormick C. (2019), *The Science of Communicating Science*.CSIRO Publishing. ISBN:9781486309818
- ◆ Bennett D. J. & Jennings R.C. (2011), *Successful Science Communication*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN:978-0-521-17678-1