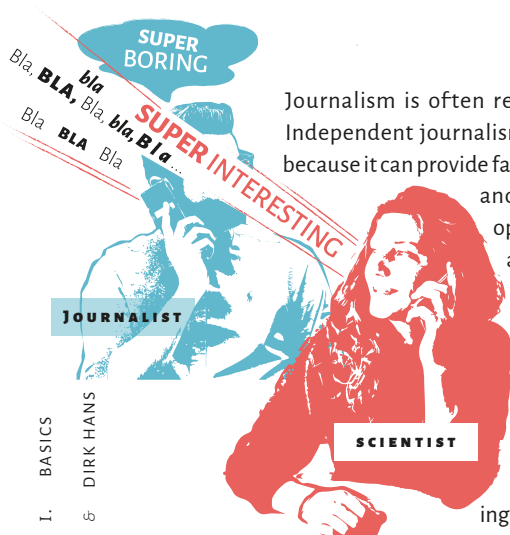


Science communication and science journalism



I. BASICS

8 DIRK HANS

Journalism is often referred to as the “fourth estate”. Independent journalism is fundamental to democracies because it can provide factual information, reveal grievances and represent a diverse spectrum of opinions. It is not without reason that autocrats shun press freedom like the devil shuns holy water.

Science journalism is part of this “fourth estate”. Given the enormous importance of science in our modern knowledge societies, it is currently all the more surprising how inadequately equipped – both financially and in terms of staff – many journalistic media are in the domain of science. Declining revenues in the media industry have played their part. Fortunately, compensatory structures such as Science Media Centres (see Essential 45) have emerged to help out.

However, journalism also feels threatened by the ever-increasing professionalisation of institutional science communication, i.e. the work of the highly qualified communications departments of research institutions, but also by the increasing number of social media channels, often run directly by scientists. News are disseminated without anyone checking the quality of the information, the honesty of the source, or its motivation. Without corrective action, boasting and false promises could become a profitable strategy and even tempt institutional science communication. The important function of journalism – to act as a filter and to separate the relevant from the irrelevant – is no longer fulfilled if science editorial teams of independent media outlets are no longer present or are bypassed.

6.

It is not uncommon to find former, often badly paid science journalists in the communications departments of well equipped research institutions. Indeed, articles in print magazines or video contributions from research institutions are often indistinguishable from articles in major newspapers or coverage on publicly funded television. But there is one very important difference that is increasingly being overlooked by uncritical recipients: independence!

The internal editorial team of a research institution is unlikely to carry out investigative journalistic research on data manipulation and misconduct by its own executives. Instead, they are more likely to present success stories to enhance their institute's reputation.

But should publicly funded science be afraid of independent journalism? Well – both journalism and science ideally pursue the goal of supporting an informed and educated society, so the answer should be “no”.

In fact, science must allow itself to be asked the question: What are you doing for good and independent science journalism? Supporting institutions like Science Media Centres through financial contributions is one possibility for larger research organisations. Another would be to make press releases more transparent through a code of conduct, including information on conflicts of interest, third-party funding, animal testing or dual-use issues. And last but not least there is something to do for everyone: Subscribe to a good newspaper or online magazine that offers well-researched science journalism. We must all be willing to pay a bit for good journalism.



Recommended reads:

- ♦ Massarani et al. (2021), *Global Science Journalism Report: Working conditions and practices, professional ethos and future expectations*. SciDev.Net/CABI: UK. Available at: www.scidev.net/global/wp-content/uploads/Global-Science-Journalism-Report-2021.pdf