

Competition in science communication

V. HOT TOPICS
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It is said that competition is good for business. Whether science is a business or not, competition exists, and hardly any other discipline benefits as much from it as communication. Doing good science and talking about it seems to be the formula for success. Accordingly, communication activities are booming, especially in highly competitive situations. Of course, the new cluster needs a fancy website accompanied by social media, the study programme must now be sung about on TikTok, and rehearsing for a press photo can sometimes take hours, especially for collaborative projects.

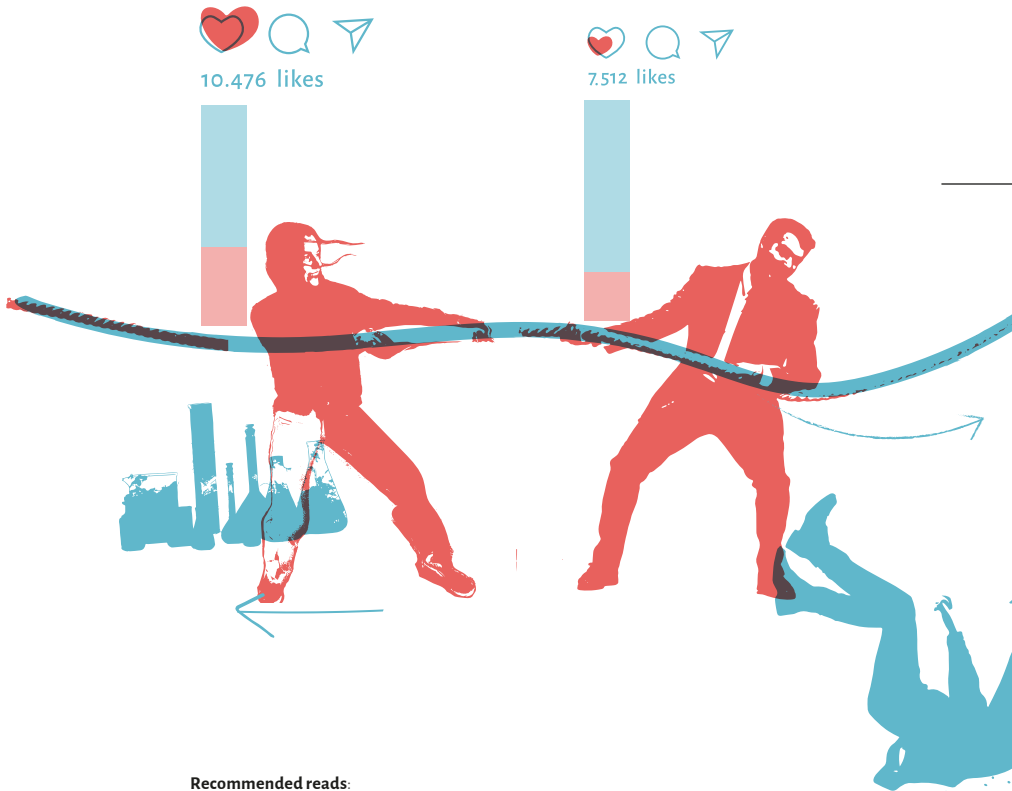
Meanwhile, the introduction of alternative metrics for assessing the performance of academics has strengthened communication at the individual level as well: A higher “social impact”, as measured by Twitter retweets and likes, for example, may help in the competition for a professorship. In the best case, the public benefits through more and better information, more creative formats and new opportunities for participation.

Unlike in corporate marketing, however, competitive or “strategic” communication in science also has undesirable side effects. It can be tempting to exaggerate results, conceal failures, and understate risks. At the individual level, it can reward braggarts.

Most people are very good at seeing through product advertising. They know that the sugar content of their breakfast cereal is only listed in small print on the box, and that they don't automatically get a buzz just because the slogan promises it. With science, it's a different story – the claims are expected to be true. In surveys on possible reasons for not trusting science, citizens cite its potential dependence on funders as the most important reason^[34]. Competitive communication makes precisely this dependency visible. It can be damaging. Just one example: It is not without reason that the German PR Council, the self-regulatory body for the PR

profession, recently issued its own guideline on science communication. Between 2019 and 2022, three research institutions or their communications agencies have been reprimanded.

So what can be done? Ignoring competition is not helpful. Good science communication is like good science: self-critical and reflective at a high level. It considers all the consequences of its actions, and the more effective they are, the more carefully it acts. In case of doubt, this means foregoing a snappy headline, a cool picture or a new channel, even if others are already using them.



Recommended reads:

- ◆ Medvecky F. & Leach J. (2019), *An Ethics of Science Communication*, Palgrave Pivot Cham. ISBN: 978-3-030-32116-1; <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32116-1>