



Science communication in Germany. A practice in transition

Reviewed Conference

FORUM WISSENSCHAFTSKOMMUNIKATION 2022
LEIBNIZ UNIVERSITÄT, HANNOVER, GERMANY, 4–6 OCTOBER 2022

Reviewed by

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Abstract

Alongside informative discussions on Science Communication and Public Engagement, Forum Wissenschaftskommunikation 2022 reveals a field, a practice, and a community in transition. In and out of session discussions uncovered underlying tensions as well as potential synergies along a spectrum of practice between established disseminatory methodologies and participatory approaches. The future for best practice, collaboration, and growth for science communication in Germany will be a fascinating one to track.

Keywords

Public engagement with science and technology

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Forum Wissenschaftskommunikation 2022, a German language Science Communication conference, was hosted at Leibniz Universität, Hannover from 4–6 October 2022, with “Shaping transformation — science communication for a society in transition” as the theme.

Following pre-conference workshops and tours, the conference itself launched with a welcome by Rebecca Winkels, Director of Communications and Strategy for Wissenschaft im Dialog, the Forum hosts since 2008. She stressed that links between science communication practice and research needed to be strengthened, and called for a move from ‘discussion to doing’.

The opening panel was heavily skewed toward policymakers and officials, rather than practitioners, and this was reflected in the discussion. There was significant talk of trust in science, the use and misuse of print and broadcast media, and scientists involving themselves in politics. Disagreement in the panel came from a statement that ‘researchers are not communicators’ and communication should only come from professionals. The point of view of researchers was brought up in

terms of the pressures they face detracting from their ability to communicate. There was little discussion on publics and their values. A thoughtful comment from Theda Minthe, Head of Science City Hannover, stated that science and research engagement can learn from societal actors in a city, as they tackle urban questions through participation and partnerships.

German researchers' points of view were further investigated in a session led by Dominik Adrian from the German Centre for Research on Science and Higher Education. His research, started prior to, but conducted mostly during the COVID pandemic, showed that only 30% of early-career researchers in Germany engage in science communication activity, mostly contributing to print and broadcast media, with their primary motivation being a sense of duty to society. Of the 70% who don't participate, the overwhelming reason is lack of time, followed by a lack of skills and confidence. This draws interesting parallels to the U.K. Factors Affecting Public Engagement by Researchers report [Hamlyn et al., 2015].

An interesting session on the future of museums and science centres started with a provocation: all museums should close by 2035 and delivery should be online. The panel discussion can be summarised in the elegant phrase, 'Hands on. Brains on.', referring to the benefit of being present in a physical space. Audience reflections made links to the proposed purpose of a museum. Is it to convey complex ideas, or instil curiosity and raise aspirations? If the latter, shouldn't museums and science centres address how they can become more embedded in their community rather than their buildings? This led to a fascinating discussion on business models and the needs of the facilities versus their mission.

Forum Wisskomm was composed of parallel sessions that continued into the evenings, allowing extended time for networking and discussions. The titles of parallel sessions reflected an ongoing transition in the German field of science communication research and practice. While the majority of sessions were on communication through the media or other disseminatory modes, a small but significant portion moved towards showcasing or supporting more dialogic approaches. This can be exemplified in the comparison of two sessions, both discussing codes of conduct.

Firstly, a panel introducing a set of guidelines for science PR [Deutscher Rat für Public Relations, 2022], created by experts and informed by public discussion, inspired heated discussion. While primarily aimed at communication professionals, the guidelines would also serve communicating scientists. Audience input varied from admiration to suggestions that it was overly controlling and designed to reinforce the internal role of institutional press teams, including that of gatekeeper between researcher and public. This latter comment received a vigorous round of applause.

At the other end of the spectrum was the launch of a final consultation for a set of 'Principles for Public Engagement' for professional science communicators in Germany. This was presented as a workshop, welcoming participant's critical reflection on the legitimacy, practical use, and values of the principles with the aim of reflecting the needs and values of the target community and making an accessible and applicable document [Cyber Valley & Berlin School of Public Engagement and Open Science, 2022].

Other highlights included a keynote delivered by Prof. Dr. Maja Göpel on, ‘Creating knowledge in turbulent times: where do we stand and what is pending?’ As well as encouraging scientists to take on societal responsibility and be part of the change they want to see, she challenged science communication to work more in dialogue: by emphasising listening, developing creative exchange formats and viewing transparency as a mark of quality.

Another key moment included the presentation of the Lorenz Oken Medal, celebrating special achievements in dialogue between science and society, awarded to Dr. Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim, a German chemist, science communicator, television presenter and YouTuber [Nguyen-Kim, 2016].

On reflection, Forum WissKomm was the embodiment of this year’s theme. It represents a field, a practice, and a community in transition. From an established focus on media, press releases, and methods of information dissemination, a new cohort of practitioners are asserting themselves with a strong focus on co-creation, inclusivity, and dialogic methods and an emphasis on the purpose of their activity rather than the methods. The way ahead promises to be fascinating as these two overlapping outlooks forge a pathway that allows them to learn from each other, find synergies, and develop a practice that advances the purpose as well as the methods of science communication in Germany.

Forum WissKomm 2023 will take place from 15–17 November 2023 in Bielefeld.

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