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COMMENT

# Beyond expectation: institutional and structural shortfalls in supporting scholars engaged in science communication

**Commentary on**

Scholars under attack — Navigating the dark side of public engagement and science communication in a politicised (online) environment

**Josephine B. Schmitt and Sabine Reich**

**Abstract**

The commentary diagnoses a structural contradiction: policy, institutions, and funders often encourage outward-facing activity while outsourcing its risks to individual scholars or external institutions. Integrating interviews with climate change researchers (N=13) as a case study alongside selected scholarship (without claiming completeness), we document how institutional reputation can overshadow researcher-centered support, how training often underaddresses emotional and security burdens, and how assistance can wane when harassment escalates. While various studies — including our own — still point to inadequate support structures, there is a wide range of services on offer that could prove effective in the long term. We elaborate on some of these in more detail, with a particular focus on Germany as the authors' (academic) home country.

**Keywords**

Women in science; Digital science communication; Scholarly communication

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On Tuesday afternoon, a junior climate researcher posted a thread on social media translating her latest paper into plain language. By evening, her inbox was flooded — with interview requests, but also with threats, doxxing attempts, and demands from her university to "coordinate messaging." Such scenes are no longer exceptional. Many scientists consider public engagement a duty to strengthen trust in science and stimulate social interest in scientific findings [Kobayashi et al., 2025]. Moreover, science communication has become an expected norm within academia. Yet the organizational structures surrounding it are often ad hoc, underfunded, and unable to respond to today's polarized, networked environments [Gagnon & Gelashvili, 2025].

This commentary argues a structural contradiction in science communication: institutions and funders promote public engagement while outsourcing its risks to individual scholars. To illustrate how these systemic frictions manifest in practice, we draw on background interviews we conducted as part of a study with climate researchers [Reich & Schmitt, 2025], a paradigmatic high-salience, highly politicized field where visibility and vulnerability often coincide. Focusing on this domain illustrates how rising expectations and societal need for science communication intersect with uneven institutional support in practice. By placing these lived experiences in dialogue with current scholarship and policy frameworks, we illustrate how institutional reputation can overshadow support for researchers, how training often under-addresses emotional and security issues, and how assistance can diminish when harassment escalates. We contextualize these dynamics within the broader expectations and challenges of science communication, concluding with practical recommendations for researchers and policymakers. While we have attempted to consider various scientific contexts to emphasize the international relevance of the issue, this commentary mainly refers to the German perspective.

## 1 ▪ What is expected — and by whom?

The expectation that scholars engage with the public is no longer merely desirable: it has been codified in science policy [OECD, 2023; Wissenschaftsrat, 2021], and funding frameworks [Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, 2024], and treated as a marker of academic quality [Leibniz Gemeinschaft, 2025; Wissenschaftsrat, 2021]. In the German context, this shift is, for example, most clearly articulated by the Council of Science and Humanities (German: Wissenschaftsrat), which has explicitly elevated science communication to a core academic mission. Its recommendation that science communication should be "anchored as a strategic task of institutional leadership" recognizes it as "an integral part of the scientific work process" rather than a voluntary add-on [Wissenschaftsrat, 2021, p. 59]. U.K. Research and Innovation (UKRI) explicitly establishes public engagement of scientists as an evaluation criterion for public funding [U.K. Research and Innovation (UKRI), 2025]. Alongside intellectual merit, broader impacts are key evaluation criteria used by the US National Science Foundation [National Science Foundation, 2024]. The German Research Foundation (DFG) not only mandated that researchers increase science communication [Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, 2024]. It enables researchers to explicitly integrate science communication into their funding proposals, thereby framing it as a core scientific task eligible for financial support.

Thus, science policy institutions and funders reflect the political significance of how science is communicated, both for democratic debate and for sustaining public trust amid polarized

groups [Weingart & Joubert, 2019]. Accordingly, universities and research organizations have become more public-oriented [Giuffredi et al., 2024; Serong et al., 2017], using communication to build their reputations, attract funding, gain political attention, and recruit talent [Fähnrich, 2018], rather than to inspire dialogue [Giuffredi et al., 2024]. As part of their broader communication strategy, some universities now acknowledge the value of their scholars' social media presence in shaping their institutional reputation and provide training to guide these efforts.

On their way through the academic system, scholars are aware of these rising expectations towards their public engagement [Banse et al., 2025]. However, the institutional demand for visibility stands in stark contradiction to the material conditions of academic labor. For example, while the Council of Science and Humanities calls for long-term dialogue and trust-building with society, the frequent use of strictly limited fixed-term contracts for temporary employment of researchers — mainly in the early stages of their career — often creates high staff turnover, thereby posing a significant hindrance to effective science communication. It is precisely these early-career scholars who, according to research, are the most eager to engage with the public, particularly in online spaces, where they often lead the charge in innovative communication [Besley et al., 2018].

In an oversaturated academic job market, however, this engagement becomes a double-edged sword. Public visibility is increasingly viewed as a necessary career differentiator to survive the "bottleneck." Yet, the time-intensive labor it requires is rarely credited toward tenure or contract renewal [Kobayashi et al., 2025; Schøning et al., 2025]. In our background interviews, scholars reported similar stances such as: "*I do science communication in my spare time. Nevertheless, it is widely used and in demand by institutions [...]. This has also led to more overload*" (I1, f). Thus, young scholars are placed in a structural double bind. They perceive growing expectations for science communication and public engagement, as well as market competition pressure to be public. Yet, they are employed by institutions under laws that penalize the time investment that such engagement requires. The precariousness of academic careers is the institutional backdrop that must be acknowledged when discussing the problems that publicly visible scientists face.

## 2 ▪ When visibility becomes vulnerability

If science communication is increasingly framed as a core academic mission, institutions must also confront the risks that accompany public engagement [Nölleke et al., 2023; Theocharis et al., 2020]. Approximately 45% of scientists across disciplines in a German study report having experienced anti-science attacks [Blümel & Just, 2024], defined as behaviors that extend beyond legitimate criticism to include deliberate belittling, public harassment, personal discrimination, attempts to silence researchers, threats, and legally relevant acts such as intimidation or vandalism. Comparable patterns appear internationally [Eslen-Ziya et al., 2024; Oksanen et al., 2022]. This risk is amplified for scholars in highly politicized or moralized issue areas, such as vaccination, climate, migration, and gender research. In these contexts, attacks may escalate from online abuse to include threats intended to intimidate and silence [O'Connor, 2023]. If universities do not unequivocally support their researchers, particularly when they are attacked, those researchers may feel abandoned by their institution and need to justify their work, as one of our interviewees points out.: *"And then it [is] just seen as unnecessary or even dangerous, [...] I would be*

*doing something dangerous, which would then also reflect badly on them [my colleagues] or the institution. That naturally creates a difficult working environment.*" (I2, f).

These risks are not incidental but rather, they are structurally patterned: Women and members of marginalized groups (e.g., PoC), tend to experience higher levels of hate and abuse that are often gendered and racialized, as well as sexual harassment and systematic attempts to delegitimize or deny their scientific expertise [Döring & Mohseni, 2020; Gelashvili & Gagnon, 2024; Hopfe et al., 2022].

As a consequence of hostility, scientists report higher psychological distress and lower generalized trust [Oksanen et al., 2022], self-censorship [Celuch et al., 2023], as well as less enthusiasm and a lower willingness to participate in science communication [Eslen-Ziya et al., 2024]. Female scientists who experience sexualized attacks adapt their behavior noticeably, responding with compensatory measures such as adjusting their appearance or the way they present their references [McDonald et al., 2020]. They also respond with self-protection and self-blame, focusing on increasing protective mechanisms in the online environment or avoiding specific formats and topics [McDonald et al., 2020; Veletsianos et al., 2018]. Some researchers redirect their work to less-exposed topics or even leave academia rather than bear these burdens alone [Doerfler et al., 2021]. In our interviews, researchers reported ignoring the issue and temporarily withdrawing from social networks (I2, f; I7, m). They are sometimes advised to limit their social media activity to avoid adverse reactions: "*When the project management says: 'Then you'd better not use social media. We'll end up with hate comments. We want a positive image, don't we? Then we'll only post sunshine, without facts and figures, so that no one can attack us.*" (I2, f). Some of our interview partners received help from colleagues or student assistants to cope with negative feedback — either through emotional support (e.g., I12, f; I2, f), filtering out relevant feedback, or blocking accounts (e.g., I1, f, I4, m). However, scientists also expressed resistance, which increased their motivation to engage in science communication; they benefited from mobilizing support among their colleagues, friends, and professional networks [see also Veletsianos et al., 2018].

This shows that visibility can turn into vulnerability which affects careers, well-being, and knowledge production. It amplifies the institutionalized double bind described above, creating a need for heightened institutional protection — underscoring the fact that framing public engagement as a core academic mission also entails a duty of care. This duty includes support structures, protocols, and resources that mitigate these asymmetric risks. However, the lived reality for scholars often tells a different story. In the following sections, we contrast the "official" institutional logic of viewing communication as a tool for reputation management with the precarious reality faced by scholars.

## 3 ▪ An uneven match: policy and institutional support

This discussed convergence increases institutions' responsibility to safeguard researchers — by encouraging engagement and providing the necessary infrastructure. Findings reveal considerable variation across countries and disciplines. Support for researchers who have been attacked is often limited and inconsistent [Gagnon & Gelashvili, 2025; Gosse et al., 2021; Houlden et al., 2022; Oksanen et al., 2022], leaving external institutions to fill gaps in legal and social assistance [Seeger et al., 2024]. Institutions still respond too slowly to the speed and scale of online attacks, and existing measures rarely meet diverse needs [Gosse

et al., 2021]. At the same time, women, scholars of color, LGBTQ+ scholars, and scholars with precarious employment face higher exposure and require tailored support [Gagnon & Gelashvili, 2025]. For example, evidence focusing on female scholars documents uneven institutional assistance, underscoring the importance of sensitivity and proactive support from universities [Houlden et al., 2022]. However, a wide range of services is available that could be effective in the long term. We will elaborate on some of these services in more detail, focusing particularly on Germany, as it is the (academic) home country of the authors'.[1]

## 4 ▪ Support in case of hostility

Researchers facing hostility can find references to best practices for personal and institutional handling in various guides [e.g. Marwick et al., 2016]. However, much of this guidance focuses primarily on physical security rather than emotional well-being and long-term psychosocial support. In such situations, documenting incidents, seeking professional advice, and avoiding facing hostility alone are crucial steps for protecting safety and strengthening resilience [Veletsianos et al., 2018]. In scientific organizations and associations, designated roles such as ombudspersons, equal opportunity officers, and anti-discrimination officers can serve as initial contacts for individuals affected by harassment. Ideally, these individuals act as internal allies, helping to coordinate support and develop response strategies. In addition, institutions should recognize that academic environments are often shaped by strict and sometimes unquestioned hierarchies that can enable sexism, discrimination, and other abuses of power [Mahmoudi, 2023; McCarry & Jones, 2021; Schmitt, 2022]. Initiatives such as the *Netzwerk gegen Machtmissbrauch in der Wissenschaft* address these systemic dynamics and offer independent advice to those affected [see also Scherpenberg et al., 2021].

Where institutional structures are absent or insufficient, external organizations can provide legal, practical, and informational support. In Germany, HateAid offers advice and support for individuals affected by hate speech, including assistance in enforcing their rights. The *Neue Deutsche Medienmacher*innen helpdesk* provides a compilation of useful links and contact points for individuals affected by or observing hate speech. righttobe or PEN America among others, offer similar services in English. The German platform *Scicomm-Support* has also emerged as an important resource in Germany, offering training materials, guides, and workshops for affected individuals and research institutions alike [e.g. Vogt & Erlitz, 2025].

In more severe cases, protection-oriented programs become relevant. International networks such as Scholars at Risk (SAR) Network support researchers facing persecution through advocacy, hosted placements, and training for receiving institutions. In Germany, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation's Philipp Schwartz Initiative provides temporary fellowships for researchers at risk at German research institutions. Comparable opportunities also exist at the European level, for example through selected Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.

1. The following discussion is situated within a democratic context in which freedom of expression and academic freedom as well as tolerance, diversity, and human dignity are fundamental values that are protected by the constitution. At the same time, we acknowledge that in many countries threats to researchers and to academic freedom emanate from governments themselves, including politically driven interference, intimidation, and legal or administrative pressures on scholars and institutions.

## 5 ▪ Training as infrastructure: building safety and resilience

While a carefully crafted rebuttal can help correct misinformation and strengthen one's position [Schmid & Betsch, 2019], responding effectively requires specific skills, time, and support structure. Targeted training can help researchers recognize and analyze hostile argumentation patterns, respond strategically, and protect their own well-being. Although training can improve communication skills [Cagle et al., 2025; Dudo et al., 2021], many programs focus on production and dissemination rather than inclusivity, safety, and response to harassment. For instance, women report participating in training and mentoring more frequently than men, which may reflect unequal exposure and responsibilities [Wilkinson et al., 2022]. Regular training and structured exchanges should be institutionalized (see e.g., NaWik).

However, such measures must be embedded within broader structural conditions. Researchers need sufficient time and resources to address negative feedback on their science communication in their everyday academic work. Moreover, institutions and science policy actors should cultivate greater sensitivity to the emotional challenges associated with harassment and hostility. Since these challenges often exceed what can be addressed through short-term training or coaching, sustainable support systems, such as ongoing supervision, peer exchange, and psychosocial care, are necessary to ensure researchers' long-term resilience and ability to participate confidently in public discourse.

## 6 ▪ Conclusion and outlook

Scientific expertise now directly influences public and political debates more than ever before [Wissenschaftsrat, 2021]. Consequently, science is often viewed not as an impartial authority, but rather as a partisan actor or as a legitimating device for contentious decisions. This makes robust institutional safeguards and support systems all the more vital. The following minimum viable architecture is suggested by our previous argumentation: clear roles and escalation paths; preventive resourcing and protected time; training that integrates safety, equity, and crisis response; accessible legal and psychosocial services; and partnerships with external providers that are anchored in policy, budget, and leadership accountability. Additionally, research institutions can strengthen their overall capacity to safeguard and empower their scholars by developing institutional response protocols for digital threats, implementing monitoring tools to assess the effectiveness of internal and external support structures, and integrating science communication more systematically into academic performance frameworks. Beyond institutional reform, promoting scientific and civic literacy in society can alleviate the pressure on researchers working in polarized fields. At the same time, researchers' engagement in communicating scientific results should be understood as an evidence-based commitment to democratic and humanistic values. Science communication can only fulfill its democratic function of connecting evidence, policy, and public trust when it is structurally protected and socially valued.

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