

The Siggen Impulse

The Siggen Circle was created as a think tank for the future of science communication. In July 2013, our members met for five days at the Siggen Estate in Holstein, Germany, with no assignment or mandate from our respective institutions, at the initiative of the ZEIT Verlag and at the invitation of the Alfred Toepfer Foundation, to discuss the central topics and trends, opportunities and challenges facing science communication today. Our members work for universities and research institutes, scientific academies, administrations, funding institutions, initiatives, agencies, companies and editorial offices, as communication officials, speakers, scientists and journalists. To promote shared interests in the field of science communications, we believe it is crucial to obtain inter-institutional understanding and to coordinate our activities – knowing that our interests, motives and priorities may differ to some extent.

This position paper is a joint publication, the aim of which is to provide inspiration for science communication in those areas where science and society meet and, at times, collide.

Science and public communication

Science drives change in all areas of public and private life. At the same time, it provides the knowledge needed to evaluate and assess such change.

Science communication can share societally relevant knowledge with a broad audience, explaining it in a non-technical way. A prerequisite for this is critical public discussion, which allows society to form realistic expectations of science. In order to reach this goal, communication about scientific processes must be guided by the values transparency and integrity.

Position of science communication

- Science communication is now well-established in Germany. Its role is recognised as an increasingly important one, both for science itself and for the general public.
- Science communication is becoming ever more involved in preparing scientific findings and expertise that will be used as crucial foundations for political decisions.
- Science communication has become professionalised and diversified. In addition to reporting on research and facilitating dialogue with the public, it now includes fields such as marketing and communication consulting. The individual actors in the domain are facing growing competition for reputations, funding and influence. Communicating scientific findings is complemented by political communication as well as profile building and institutional positioning.
- The number of actors involved in science communication has increased considerably. With the diversification of the scientific system, which has seen research associations, centres of excellence, research institutes and collaborative research centres actively engaging in communication, new roles have emerged for communicators. These stakeholder interactions in interconnected scientific systems are becoming more and more complex and may lead to conflicts of interest that will merit further reflection.
- Our target audiences and the ways in which they communicate are changing. Many people no longer see themselves merely as recipients but also as active transmitters in the communication process: interactive communication and dialogue with the public, not to mention the demand for transparency, are all gaining in importance.
- Science communication takes place across many different formats and channels. It can unlock new audiences (e.g. via YouTube, apps, science slams, participatory formats and MOOCs – Massive Open Online Courses).

- Through social media, scientists have the opportunity to address the public directly. Yet many of them hesitate to take that direct approach, and there are still only a small number of scientists currently seeking the support of their communication departments in order to build, expand and professionalise their communication skills. To change this pattern, communication departments should provide motivation and support. In doing so, it is important to remain respectful of science and its inherent logic and culture.
- Overall, people feel that there is an overabundance of communication activities. Without differentiated communication that targets a specific audience and applies clear priorities, the quality and credibility of science communication are in danger. Critical self-reflection, the development of strategies, and an intelligent division of tasks in the light of a scarcity of resources may help reach a better balance between research communication and image building. In this process, it is important to establish better coordination between the individual groups of participants, to optimise the impact of science communication.
- The role of the media as an evaluative, contextualising body is weakening. In particular, high-quality science journalism is at risk of being marginalised by the current structural change from traditional media towards digitalisation. At the same time, new opportunities are arising. Science can contribute to the development of new platforms, formats and forms for dialogue amongst a fragmented public (community involvement, crowd-funded science, journalists as publishers, involvement of freelance journalists, remote journalism, journalists in residence, etc.). Science communication can take on a supporting role in the public communication of changes in respect of which society and journalism are dependent on scientific expertise.
- The reputation of science is under threat as a result of scientific misconduct and the economisation and business-orientation of science communication (making everything into an event, star culture, inappropriate advertising, etc.). One of the crucial tasks facing today's science communication is to counteract a loss of faith in science by frankly identifying undesirable developments and providing room for self-reflection by actors with varying interests.
- Thus far, science communication in Germany seems to have received little international attention and possesses insufficient international ties. Over the coming years, scientific communicators should work to proactively engage with European and international networks, examine external best practices for their viability in the German context, develop exemplary international projects and communicate more actively about developments via networks and the media.

Values

We believe these to be the core values of science communication:

- Truthfulness and credibility
- Benefit for society
- Transparency
- Willingness of the scientific world to engage in an active dialogue with society
- Self-criticism and willingness to change
- Independence
- Openness to cooperation of all those involved

We believe in the importance of a **Science communication Charter** – a set of guidelines signed by as many concerned stakeholders as possible, particularly institutions in the scientific system – and hope to participate in its construction.

The Charter should set down the basic principles for science communication, thereby:

- raising awareness and respect for the work cultures of the various actors (scientists, journalists, scientific communicators and scientific organisations);
- raising awareness of the effects of communication on research and findings;
- establishing a standard of transparency in terms of the background to research (financing, personnel, motivation and goals); and
- promoting cross-institutional cooperation between scientific actors.

The Siggen Circle, August 2013

Attachment:

Conference participants:

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