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Consequences for Science, Politics and Media

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Hanns-J. Neubert

Promises, promises...

Science communication is a term which came up anew about 10 or 15 years ago when the scientific institutions and the science politicians were confronted with increasing criticism and recognised that science and technology did not have the desirable backing by tax payers. But science and technology are of utmost importance for the development of modern societies.

One of the first modern science communicators was Alexander von Humboldt with his public lectures in the early 19th century. A first wave of what is called today science communication came up after World War I when universities introduced their public lectures and industries established their literary departments, as they were called at that time. But the seed of real communication came never to bloom after authoritarian systems rose in Europe.

And what is called science communication today has never been communication at all. Regarding scientific institutions a back channel necessary for real communication did not really exist. Instead, science institutions produced mainly communiqués highlighting their successes without delivering the background and showing the scene of the research. Many media-outlets by science institutions are not results, but only promises. Far too often when journalists tried to follow up promises, the result was silence. Only building on promises, science communication has a quite anti-democratic aspect.

After leaving school, citizens are only fed with bits of scientific results, too often without relevance to their real life, or without background and research environment, resulting in information overflow. This lead to a decrease in science literacy ("Bildung") of European citizens. Although they acquire more information, this information cannot be moulded into knowledge and thus to literacy. In addition, the media were not able to fill the gaps needed for knowledge based decisions in democratic societies. The failure of the media to fully play their role in democratic societies seems, at least in part, to be the result of the globalisation of capital and governmental support for the capitalisation of the media. Although the media have a democratic function, they are increasingly forced to generate profits and returns of investment giving them less possibilities to deliver in-depth knowledge.

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Stefan Stegmaier
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