Workshop discussion: How should the scientific community behave in controversial political debates? Roles – Challenges – Practices

This discussion paper is based on the outcomes of a workshop discussion with experts from different scientific fields who work at the intersection of research, politics, economics and society. It took place on June 3, 2019, at the office of the National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina in Berlin. The participants included Marie-Luise Beck, German Climate Consortium; Martin Bujard, Federal Institute for Population Research; Andreas Edel, Population Europe; Anne Faulmann, National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina; Benedikt Fecher, Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society; Gritje Hartmann, German Institute for Economic Research, DIW Berlin; Emily Lines, Population Europe; Patrizia Nanz, Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies; Katja Patzwaldt, National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina; Ina Sauer, German Research Foundation, DFG; Cornelia Schu, Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration; Guido Speiser, Max Planck Society; Dorota Stasiak, Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies; Bastian Strauch, Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies; Matthias Tang, Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies; Felix Wassermann, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin; Markus Weißkopf, Science in Dialogue, WiD; Harald Wilkoszewski, WZB Berlin Social Science Center.

The value of scientific work is no longer measured just by whether it meets research-based quality criteria, but by its social impact.[1] In addition to engaging in established forms of scientific work at the intersection between research and industrial applications, and between education and training, scientific institutions are increasingly being called upon to generate knowledge that addresses complex social issues. Institutions have been responding to this challenge using what has become a broad and well-established range of formats that take into account the communication platforms used by specific target groups.

[1] See, for example, Hachmeister, C.-D., Henke, J., Roessler, I., and Schmid, S. (Eds.): Gestaltende Hochschulen. Beiträge und Entwicklungen der Third Mission (= die hochschule 1/2016), Institut für Hochschulforschung (HoF), Halle-Wittenberg 2016.

However, communicating scientific findings and engaging with social actors carries risks, as many scientists worry that cooperating with actors from politics, business and civil society may open them up to charges of bias, and could lead them to lose scientific credibility. Especially when confronted with highly controversial political issues, direct attacks or attempts to influence subject matter by third parties, scientists usually cannot avoid taking a stand. Moreover, scientists may find themselves exposed to a culture of debate they are not accustomed to, especially when dealing with actors who are highly opinionated or hostile to the media, or who simply reject the majority view of the scientific community.

Scientific institutions differ greatly in the extent to which they are prepared or obligated to take a position in such controversies, or to engage with actors outside of the scientific community. While some scientific institutions have a statutory mission to provide policy advice (e.g. departmental research institutions, the German Research Foundation, the Leibniz Society, or the science academies) or to cooperate with companies (e.g. the Fraunhofer Society), others feel that their primary commitment is to conducting basic research. This is also the case for the scientists themselves, whose career paths may provide them with little incentive to communicate with members of the public outside of their specialist community. In addition, scarce (time, financial, personal) resources must be used for preparation or follow-up work for such communication activities.

Given the risks involved in getting pulled into public controversies or PR crisis situations, scientists often refuse altogether to participate in political dialogue. This space is then filled by consulting firms, self-appointed 'experts', and lobbyists for whom it is clearly easier for to greatly simplify complex issues and to tailor their messages to the market, as they are generally not governed by the self-regulatory mechanisms associated with scientific research. Thus, by foregoing engagement with the public, scientific institutions forfeit the ability to shape public perceptions on these important societal matters to third parties – which ultimately hurts the institutions themselves when it comes to the conditions for engaging in scientific work, guaranteeing the 'freedom of research', and financial resources.

While the Science Barometer (WiD) shows that the public continues to have a high level of trust in science, it is no longer breaking a taboo to publicly present 'alternative' evidence

that is not subject to scientific scrutiny, while simultaneously discrediting undesirable scientific findings. With the rise of populism, the rules that scientists once had to observe when engaging with the public appear to have changed fundamentally.

Scientists should not react to these developments by adapting their behaviour to 'market demands' or by lowering their quality standards. Instead, they should remind the public of the value of solid scientific evidence, while being fully transparent about the scientific methods they use. At the same time, they should reflect proactively on how their behaviour is viewed by society. This may include thinking critically about the scientific method itself, as trust in the self-regulatory mechanisms of science has eroded even within the scientific community (as the so-called 'replication crisis' has shown). Thus, scientists can no longer rely on their unique selling point of scientific expertise not being challenged. Instead, scientific researchers and institutions have to adapt their messages to fit the multiplicity of communication platforms (with social media playing an increasingly prominent role), and to take (more) active steps to meet societal expectations that they satisfy the information demands of specific actors by integrating their findings systematically into organisational and human resource development, and into the development of new learning-oriented interface formats.

Incentive systems can be implemented that motivate scientists to increase their engagement levels, such as by including an assessment of their public profile in job application processes. Among the important conditions for ensuring the success of science communication and social consulting are providing training options for scientists (such as the format offered by the WZB that invites younger researchers to engage in an exchange with politicians), creating a professional infrastructure in research institutions led by communication experts specialising in political dialogue, conducting systematic analyses of the current political communication formats and their target groups, developing an awareness of the procedures and information needs of political decision-makers, and understanding the relevance of a given topic for current societal debates. In particular, the effects of an institution's activities in this area are often inadequately monitored. While the concrete repercussions of a communication process can be difficult to measure in a timely manner, media attention is frequently conflated with relevance, as the number of press

mentions is too often seen as evidence that the communication effort succeeded. Whether the impact is properly measured depends on whether the goals and indicators have been clearly defined at the organisational level. Thus, representatives from science have to address the fundamental question of what role or mission science should and can have in civic debates, and what role or mission each individual institution or organisation should and can have in such discussions given its specific profile within the overall system.

In addition to each scientific organisation clarifying internally how it should engage in politically controversial debates, there are themes and political challenges associated with research on issues that scientists and scientific organisations are increasingly addressing by joining forces in networks, alliances and teams, as in the field of climate change or demography.

Follow-up events

The issues raised here will be explored in greater depth at a conference that will be held at the end of January 2020 with experts from science, politics, business, and society. Given the importance of these issues, a series of conferences may even be considered.

At the conference, discussions should be held about the role science and the very different institutions within the scientific research system can and should play in a public realm that is changing and a society that is becoming increasingly complex, especially when dealing with highly contentious policy areas or debates. Additional topics will address the systemic factors associated with science communication, individual incentives and organisational structures, methodological questions (best-/worst-practice methods and formats), and the agenda-setting of research policy (with respect to, for example, the 9th Research Framework). Dialogue with science journalists (WPK, Science Media Center) and other target groups of science communication and science research should also be sought out in order to include the expectations of potential target groups with regard to scientific consulting.

The results of the conference(s) should then be published in a suitable form (discussion paper, policy brief, etc.) for initiating what will ideally turn into a broad societal debate.