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Further information about the project:

www.fz-juelich.de/mut/projekte/pro_inwedis_e.html

Information about the research program “Knowledge for Decision-making Processes—Research on the Relationship between Science, Politics, and Society”:

www.sciencepolicystudies.de

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MUT

Programme Group
Humans • Environment • Technology

Integration of Scientific Expertise into Media-based Public Discourses (INWEDIS)

Project term: 2004 – 2007

Funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research within the research program “Knowledge for Decision-making Processes—Research on the Relationship between Science, Politics, and Society”

Problem

Scientific expertise is an important resource for individual and political decision making. But do citizens and decision makers have easy access to that expertise in order to use it for opinion formation and decision making? Many expert committees offer their advice to decision makers and the interested public in hearings or printed expert reports. However, newspapers, magazines, and TV and radio programs also include scientific expertise. In particular, non-experts are much more likely to use the general media than more specialized information channels.

Mass media follow their own logic, which is quite different from scientific logic, but may be well adapted to everyday and political reasoning. However, it is unclear whether the media present scientific advice in a form that allows their audiences to profit from that expertise. The audiences include "ordinary" citizens and decision makers.

Problems in communicating scientific expertise via the media may occur at several stages of the communication process: at the interface of science and the media, in the journalistic processing of scientific knowledge, and in the ways the general public and decision makers make use of the scientific expertise offered by the media.

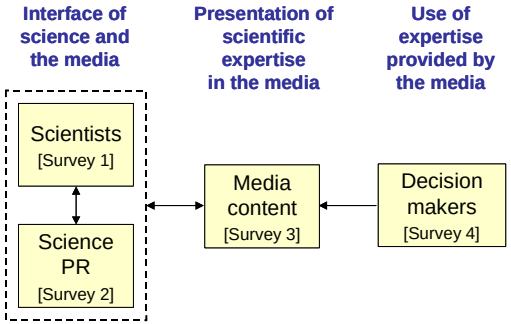
Science communication is already receiving a lot of attention. The present debate about science communication primarily centers on information presentation and the assumed impact of communication on the public image of science. Our focus is different. We ask: Does journalism-based science communication help society to make the best possible use of scientific expertise?

Research Plan

Our research design focuses on different elements of the communication system (see figure): the science/public communication interface, the semantic context of scientific expertise in the media, and the decision makers' use of scientific expertise provided by the mass media. In order to analyze these aspects, we are conducting four complementary surveys:

- A mail survey on the relationship between scientists and the media and on scientists' opinions, attitudes, and experiences that are relevant to public communication
- In-depth interviews with executives involved in public relations of science, supplemented by an analysis of relevant documents
- Detailed content analysis of media stories, looking at the journalistic handling of scientific experts and expertise
- In-depth interviews with political decision makers regarding their access to scientific expertise and their use of expert knowledge provided by the media

The analysis concentrates on two scientific fields: stem-cell research, and public health and epidemiology.



Goals

In keeping with the goals of the research program "Knowledge for Decision-making Processes" of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, our project aims at contributing to the body of scholarly knowledge about the relationship of science and policy. It looks at public science communication while combining two distinctive foci: first, the communication of scientific expertise, i.e., scientific knowledge related to practical problems and decisions; second, the role of the mass media as an information channel for scientific expertise.

In order to compare Germany with other major producers of scientific knowledge—the United States, Japan, the UK, and France—the survey of scientists and the analysis of science PR are carried out as cross-cultural studies. Are there national differences in scientific cultures regarding the relationship of science and the public? How do public relations strategies in science communication differ between countries? We address these questions with an international team of cooperation partners, which will give us the opportunity for mutual learning.

The results of our project are intended to help improve practical science communication. For this purpose, we will organize a workshop for science communicators at the end of the project term. We also seek to integrate the project results into the education of science journalists and communication training for scientists. In doing so, we will cooperate with the Department of Science Journalism of the Freie Universität Berlin.