Guidelines for good Research Communication

Preamble

Science shapes many aspects of private and social life. It is the basis for political, economic and personal developments and decisions. Science changes society with new findings, technologies, processes and ideas, and the scientific community systematically reviews its own results, methods and premises. Science is becoming more specialized and complex. This makes it increasingly difficult for many people to grasp and understand current research findings, weigh up opportunities and risks and recognize potential conflicts.

Within the sense of these guidelines, research communication is the communication of scientific information with the public. This includes communication by institutions and individual researchers, but does not include journalistic reporting on science or communication within the scientific system.

Research communication makes scientific topics accessible to the widest possible target audience, and provides tools for dialogue.

Citizens can promote or hinder science, and can grant or withdraw trust. This means that reliable information from and about science is becoming increasingly important. Those who communicate scientific knowledge therefore have a great responsibility. The framework conditions have not only changed as a result of internal scientific and social developments.

With dwindling resources, journalism is losing the ability to critically scrutinize the reliability of information. At the same time, there are more and more opportunities to share scientific knowledge with citizens and to interact with them directly via the internet and social media, at events or exhibitions. This increases the need for clarity, quality and honesty in the information and services provided.

Researchers also have a special responsibility to communicate their scientific findings in a clear and understandable way. They help to ensure that science is not only accurate and up-to-date, but also accessible and understandable. Researchers should also actively seek dialogue with the public and be prepared to answer questions and engage in discussions.

Communication officers at scientific institutions are the custodians of good research communication within their establishments. They take on an advisory and steering role in partnership with the researchers and participate in national and international discourse on practice and research in research communication.

The scientific institutions ensure appropriate framework conditions for research communication. This is especially true when communication leads to conflict. The institutions have a duty to care for the actors communicating on their behalf.[1]

Good research communication:

- is part of good research practice. In this sense, these guidelines are inextricably linked to the Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice;
- makes the positions of all those involved in the communication process visible and promotes respectful and open interaction;
- raises awareness about science in its various disciplines and explains the working methods and perspectives of researchers;
- addresses the questions and needs, and possibly the fears and reservations, of citizens and shares these with the scientific community and its decision-making bodies. It facilitates dialogue between the scientific community and society at large;
- recognizes and considers the demands and needs of journalists, including their working methods, influence and the possible consequences of reporting. It works actively with the media;
- extracts from the wealth of data available the information that is relevant to society. Self-interest should be just as unimportant as the alleged suitability of the media;
- works with the facts. It does not exaggerate research successes and does not trivialize or conceal risks. It avoids information that raises unfounded fears or hopes. It presents a transparent research process and, where possible, provides free access to the scientific sources. Good research communication facilitates dialogue about the opportunities and risks of scientific methods and results;

[1] Siggener Impulse 2020: Die Krise kommunizieren. Siggener-Impuls-2020_Krise.pdf

- identifies the limitations of statements and research methods. It assesses the significance of the information for science and society and places it in the context of the current state of research in accordance with scientific honesty. Research communication names sources and contact persons. It makes interests and financial dependencies transparent;
- addresses the motivation and work of researchers. Citizens are interested not only in facts and information, but also in the process of scientific work and the people involved;
- prepares information in a way that is appropriate for the target group and in language that is easy to understand;
- in direct, non-journalistic communication, prefers to use open tools and channels that are as accessible as possible, making knowledge available to as many people as possible without distorting presentation and context, and making content available under a Creative Commons licence wherever possible;
- is value-led*[2] and goal-orientated. It defines standards for the quality of its processes and results. It reflects self-critically on its effectiveness and avoids unnecessary or inefficient measures. Its actors provide information about their working methods and make the role of the respective speakers transparent;
- is constantly evolving and adapting its objectives, strategies and measures when necessary, for example due to technical, social or scientific changes. It takes note of research findings on research communication and remains in constant dialogue with colleagues in the specialist network.

The guidelines were developed in a cross-institutional working group, organized by Wissenschaft im Dialog and the Bundesverband Hochschulkommunikation [German Association for University Communication], for the area of scientific PR. They were adapted in 2024/2025 in line with the Guidelines for Good Research Communication as part of a participation process.

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[2] Values of Research Communication
- Benefits for society
- Transparency
- Openness of science to active dialogue with society
- Self-criticism and willingness to change
- Independence
- Willingness of all actors to cooperate
- Principles of good research practice