Press release

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Marietta Fuhrmann-Koch
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Using Facts to Convince

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Heidelberg, 1 June 2022

Using Facts to Convince
Ionica Smeets takes on Nature Marsilius Visiting Professorship for Scientific Communication at Heidelberg University

What are the features of a good popular science column? How can complex research results be presented in a lecture comprehensible to the general public? These and other questions are central to the current Nature Marsilius Visiting Professorship for Scientific Communication at Heidelberg University, taken on by Prof. Dr Ionica Smeets from Leiden University (Netherlands). A professor in this field, she heads the research group Science Communication and Society there. Prof. Smeets, who studied and received a doctorate in mathematics, also works as a science journalist. She is holding a series of workshops in the 2022 summer semester. The aim is for early-career researchers, in particular, to receive training in communicating their research to a wider public and contributing to social dialogue. A public lecture with Ionica Smeets is planned for 12 July.

The visiting professorship is a joint initiative of Holtzbrinck Berlin, the Klaus Tschira Foundation and Heidelberg University. It involves inviting well-known experts to the university to hold their own courses on what makes for high quality reporting about scholarly research and scientific findings. At the same time, the visiting professors are expected to spark a broad-based discussion about new forms of exchange between academia and the public. Previous incumbents of the visiting professorship include Sir Philip Campbell, long-standing editor-in-chief of the journal “Nature”, as well as science journalists Dagmar Röhrlich and Eva Wolfangel.

The workshops with Ionica Smeets will, amongst other topics, deal with effective communication and the avoidance of specialist jargon. The workshops will also address the difficulties encountered by using scientific facts to convince parts of society – e.g. on the topic of vaccination or climate change. In smaller practical classes the participants will, moreover, learn how easily a well-meaning communication strategy can go wrong. Ionica Smeets will also take up the question of the possible outcomes of science communication and how they can be measured.

Ionica Smeets studied Applied Mathematics and Information Science at the Delft University of Technology (Netherlands), obtaining her doctorate from Leiden University in 2010 with a thesis entitled “On continued fraction algorithms”. There she has held the post of Professor of Science Communication since 2015. She has worked as a freelance journalist since 2004, e.g. for the newspaper “de Volkskrant”, in which she also writes a weekly column. At the
same time, she introduces scientific topics in many different TV formats. Ionica Smeets has, moreover, published several books, most recently a children’s book about mathematics.

Contact:
Heidelberg University
Communications and Marketing
Press Office, phone +49 6221 54-2311
presse@rektorat.uni-heidelberg.de

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