

Digging for gold on the Reichpietschufer

13 years of journalists in residence at the WZB

Katharina Sperber

For journalists, the WZB Berlin Social Science Center is a goldmine. Generally, we have to research and assess complicated processes and states of affairs under time pressure in various places, and explain them to our readers in concise and understandable language. The expertise WZB researchers possess, their extensive network of colleagues around the world, expansive data, and analyses in the books and journals are a pure luxury for journalists.

84

When I first came to the WZB as guest journalist in 2006, I had difficulty navigating its workings – both the premises themselves and what was contained within, but these problems were soon sorted out thanks to the help and support of the WZB staff. Researchers and journalists were initially a bit wary of one another, but some actively sought contact with me with others were happy to provide the information I needed. There were those that kept themselves to themselves in their scholarly sanctums and international networks, but on the whole I felt welcomed.

Despite generally positive interactions, I was aware of the deep gulf between the two professions. “Journalists dig what is generally important out of subsystems, and thus politicize it. Science is treated no differently than the economy,” said Otfried Jarren,

media scientist at the University of Zurich. At the time, this view bothered many scientists. Science was not accustomed to being equal among equals, of being treated the same as the economy or politics. By the beginning of the 21st century, though, the media had gained self-confidence and become cheekier and less scrupulous in making use of scientific knowledge. Today, newspapers, journals, online platforms, radio, and television fight for the attention of readers, users, and audiences.

In 2006, the lovingly cultivated misunderstandings between science and the media were still numerous in Germany – to the disadvantage of both professions. For a long time, the two couldn’t get along, precisely because science and the media are so similar with both sharing a quest of the supposedly unknown, both proceed investigatively and seek truth, both work away at ideologies. Today, scientists can no longer avoid the media or supply them with findings only when it suits them. Research paid for by the taxpayer has – rightly – to justify itself.

Often times, the two professions still fail to understand one another. In German, the language of sociology and political science is full of technical terms and loan words left undefined creating an impen-

eternal jargon. Overly convoluted clauses dominate with unclear subjects and too few active verbs. The highly complex texts aim for completeness and precision at the expense of general comprehensibility. From these dry-as-dust, complicated structures, journalists have to distill the essence and make it fit for public consumption by making various loan words and technical terms into everyday language. If science doesn't offer a helping hand, key statements disseminated by the media can be very wrong. Especially in basic research, researchers now discuss their findings with colleagues worldwide almost exclusively in English. Conveying the content of these discussions in the German-language, the media faces the danger of faulty translation.

Journalists criteria include regional interest, significance, overall prominence, with an eye toward eye-opening and entertaining content. This can mean that scientists are questioned by reporters who bring with them already formed opinions seeking only confirmation. This can conflict with researchers not there to supply sound bites and summarize their work in brief three-word sentences. Journalists have to be able to listen. At any rate,

brash appearance by journalists does not release them from their duty to exercise due diligence. On the other hand, research institutions can no longer expect to find well-qualified science journalists in editorial offices as most media outlets have fallen victim to austerity measures.

Over the course of 13 years, the journalist in residence programme has helped to ease tensions between the media and science, provided new perspectives and contacts that have proved beneficial. Most journalists benefit and the program provides a goldmine, which holds much promise for the future.

Katharina Sperber works as a journalist and communication trainer in Frankfurt am Main. She was editor at the Frankfurter Rundschau and in 2006 a member of the first intake of the "Journalist in Residence" programme.

Guests of science

The *Journalist in Residence Fellowship* enables journalists to immerse themselves for a number of weeks in the world of research and to work on a topic of their choice in dialogue with researchers. The programme, then a unique endeavour in the German human and social sciences, was launched in 2006 by the WZB and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne. Since the start of the programme, which in the early years was sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation, a total of 27 journalists have been guests of the WZB, with which they have maintained close links.

