

**Parallel session 10: Science Communicator, is it a good profession?**

**THE RISE OF SCIENCE JOURNALISM IN DENMARK**

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**Abstract**

In the context of a large-scale national project on the history of Danish science, we conduct a historical investigation into the rise of science journalism in Denmark, 1938-1951. In particular, seeing science journalism as cultural boundary-work (Gieryn 1999), we study the work and lives of the two first professional science journalists in Denmark, Børge Michelsen and Niels Blædel. We situate their work in a context of scientific and public culture and try to take into account their different journalistic experiences.

**Key words:** Science journalism, history, Denmark

**Text**

Context

While Danish journalists have been reporting science since the 19th century, the professional science journalist is a recent feature of Danish history. Professional science journalists face a threefold problem of mediation. First of all, they have to know enough about science to gather and translate information about very difficult and intricate fields of expertise; secondly, they have to be very conscious not to take the hierarchical structures of scientific expertise for granted and to relate scientific topics to other fields of human experience; thirdly, they have to draw science into more general discussions of public interest. The first part of the problem is technical for the most part and a cornerstone in science journalism's professional code. The two latter parts of the mediation problem relate to the social and epistemic boundaries between science and society.

Science journalism may be seen as cultural boundary-work described by sociologist of science Thomas F. Gieryn (1999). Science journalists demarcate science as a culturally discrete and identifiable activity. Yet, at the same time, they also break down existing boundaries between science and society by creating a new cultural space for the interpretation and understanding of science, namely science as public news.

## Objective

Our objective is to situate the work of the first, professional science journalists in the context of contemporary changes in Danish scientific and public culture. Looking at the ways in which the first “real” science journalists in Denmark responded in different ways to their role as mediator between science and society, we want to demonstrate that science journalism may be seen attempts to create a historically specific and cultural space for science.

## Methods

Our study is a qualitative, historical investigation. It is carried out in relation to the on-going, five-year project on the history of Danish science, organized by the History of Science Department, University of Aarhus.<sup>1</sup> We study the articles of the two first science journalists in Denmark and try to situate them in the wider context of the contemporary history of science and social history. Also, we aim to look at the journalistic experiences of the two journalists in mention and to make it significant for their science journalism.

## Results

We find that the first two science journalists in Denmark, Børge Michelsen and Niels Blædel, focused their journalistic efforts on: 1) science (and, particularly, science carried out in Denmark) as an exemplary, noteworthy, and valuable activity, and 2) the lack of government support financial and the consequent job-related difficulties of younger scientist (see e.g. the collection of articles in Michelsen 1941, and Blædel 1949). In their science journalism, science was culturally demarcated as being something different from, yet on a par with other culturally and nationally important activities such as literature and the arts. This has to be understood in the context of WWII, which put Danish nationality under pressure, and thus created a need to promote the efforts of Danish citizens, including Danish scientists.

At the same time as aligning science, literature, and the arts, Michelsen and Blædel depicted science as an important part of the political economy of Denmark. Science, in their view, gave rise to technical advances and therefore had to be supported. Their endeavors trying to increase public support for science were in concordance with similar undertakings by several scientists and a few politicians at the time.

What separated the science journalism of Michelsen from that of Blædel was Michelsen’s occupation with the daily work of scientists (Michelsen 1941). Before taking up science as a journalistic specialty, Michelsen wrote about the everyday life of different trades, and, so, seeing science as yet another trade must have seemed naturally to Michelsen. Blædel’s starting-point was different in that he came to science journalism without much journalistic experience. He concentrated his articles about the results of science, and not its daily routines.

## Conclusions

From our studies of the rise of science journalism in Denmark, we conclude that it is, indeed, fruitful to see science journalism as cultural boundary-work that

demarcates science from other cultural activities. We conclude that the rise of science journalism in Denmark is contextually situated, i.e., it is in part a reflection of and response to contemporary developments in scientific as well as public life. Finally, we also conclude that science journalism reflect the individual background of the journalist involved.

### **Notes**

1 The principal objective of this project is to write a four-volume work in Danish on science in Denmark from the Middle Ages until recent times situating science in the context of national and international history. The two last volumes include chapters on the popularization of science. We aim to cover the topic broadly by looking at many different kinds of science popularization, including science journalism.

### **References**

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