

Parallel Session 17: Scientists and science institutions as PCST agents: responsibilities

EXPERTISE FOR THE PUBLIC: THE SCIENCE-JOURNALISM INTERFACE IN GERMAN DISCOURSE ON GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE

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Abstract

Based on a mail survey of journalists and experts we analyzed the science-journalism interface in the German discourse on global climate change. The purpose was to better understand how scientific knowledge is integrated into public discourses and to explore what happens to the meaning of scientific knowledge when it enters the realm of the media. We found a strong co-orientation of experts and journalists. Furthermore, we identified some characteristics of “meaning production” in the journalistic processing of expertise. The survey is part of our project “Climate Change in the Public Sphere” and was funded within the German Climate Research Program.

Key words: Global climate change, science-journalism interface, experts

Text

Introduction

Global climate change is one of the major environmental challenges. In Germany, the expectation of raising sea levels and increased storm tides have led to concerns about coastal protection at the North Sea coast.

Scientists have been very active putting the climate change issue on the political agenda and still are important protagonists of that issue (cf. Weingart, Engels & Pansegrau 2000). The climate change issue provides an excellent opportunity to study the inclusion of scientific expertise in public discourses. This paper deals with the interface of science and journalism: How do experts and journalists interact? Is there cooperation or antagonism? Which semantic processes take place when scientific expertise is included in media reports?

Method

Monitoring the coverage of climate change and coastal protection in 32 newspapers, magazines, radio and TV programs from February 2002 to February 2003 we identified experts quoted as sources. Experts and story authors received matching questionnaires by mail. Each questionnaire included a general module and one or more special modules referring to specific expert-journalist encounters.

169 experts returned questionnaires providing information about 186 encounters with the media (response rate 58%); 85 journalists returned

questionnaires with 103 completed special modules about encounters with experts (response rate 35%).

Results

The analysis of information channels shows that public relations as well as journalists' initiatives in contacting interview partners are important means to initiate contacts. About two third of the quotes are based on face-to-face or phone interviews.

The experts and journalists have remarkably similar beliefs about science, the media, the rights and duties of experts and journalists and the climate change risk. Selected items where there is some difference between experts and journalists are listed in Table 1. Sometimes the experts even take a more "journalistic" view than the journalists (I2) and journalists a more "scientific" view than the experts (I3). This is an indicator of co-orientation: Journalists respect expert norms and goals; experts on the other hand anticipate journalistic norms and goals.

There is only one item (I1) where experts and journalists outright disagree: Experts claim a say in the shaping of journalists' stories for which they have been interviewed, a demand that is clearly rejected by journalists.

Table 1: Beliefs and expectations of experts and journalists

	Experts (n=169)	Journalists (n=85)
I1: Experts have a say in the journalistic framing of the media product, for which they have been interviewed	1,09	-1,93
I2: Journalists can expect experts to express themselves in an understandable manner	2,10	1,27
I3: Environmental sciences should select their research questions based on purely scientific criteria	-0,02	0,47
I4: The media should always be critical regarding environmental experts and probe into their interests	1,31	2,32
I5: The media should dramatize the environmental situation a little to effectively warn the public	-1,19	-1,68
I6: Environmental experts should not only express their opinion on technical questions, but also criticize decisions and propose options for action	1,40	2,05
I7: Experts should warn the public, even if there is only a suspicion of possible dangers	1,12	1,62
I8: Environmental experts should contact journalists themselves and offer information	1,10	1,93

Mean values of a 7-step scale ranging from -3 ("strongly disagree") to +3 ("strongly agree"); all differences are statistically significant (t-test, p<0,05)

Experts and journalists assess climate risks very similarly: 90% of the experts and journalists are convinced that climate change will happen. Somewhat more than half of each group say that it is still possible to prevent climate change. And slightly more than half of the experts and journalists agree that Germany can cope with climate change. Although risk perception varies *within* the groups of experts and journalists, there is no great difference *between* the groups.

Guided by journalistic principles, “meaning production” takes place during the interactions. It is based on processes such as inquiring, selecting, emphasizing, re-contextualizing and evaluating. By means of qualitative content analysis of the answers to open questions we identified characteristics of journalistic processing of expert information:

Focus on a core message: Journalists rigorously reduce the complex expert information. They select a single aspect, omit details and apply an “angle”.

Change of context: Journalists put research results into other contexts. They make connections to political processes and everyday experience.

Preference for concrete over abstract information: Experts tend to volunteer abstract information whereas journalists expect concrete information.

Preference for definite over vague information: Experts try to be cautious. They prefer to say “something could happen” rather than “will happen”, for example. Journalists prefer definite statements and tend to omit qualifications.

Despite some criticism in detail – caused by discomfort because of semantic changes and factual errors – most experts in the climate change discourse have a lot of sympathy for the journalistic approach. Both groups express high satisfaction with the interaction partners (see Table 2). About 90% of the experts are at least “rather satisfied” how the journalists used their information.

Table 2: Evaluation of contacts

"How would you describe your contacts with journalists [experts] in general?"		
	Experts	Journalists
Mainly good	78,6%	91,7%
Good and bad experiences are balanced	20,8%	8,3%
Mainly bad	0,6%	0,0%
	100,0% (n=168)	100,0% (n=84)

Conclusion

The science-journalism interface in the climate change discourse is well-developed. The relevant scientific communities obviously include scientists who feel comfortable talking to the media and who are prepared to meet the

media's demand of not only facts but also interpretations. This expertise is processed according to journalistic rules. The resulting semantic changes only mildly irritate experts. We observe a strong co-orientation of experts and journalists, a situation that might be called "symbiotic".

Similar to other studies (cf. Peters 1995), there is strong disagreement between experts and journalists about how much control the experts should have over media coverage. Because of the strong co-orientation this control issue hardly leads to conflicts and frustrations: Journalists and experts seem to pull at different ends of a rope – but apparently they pull in the same direction.

References

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