



## Dokumentation

### **Wissenschaft braucht Gesellschaft – Wie geht es weiter nach dem March for Science?**

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Fachkonferenz der VolkswagenStiftung in Partnerschaft mit der Leopoldina – Nationale Akademie der Wissenschaften, der Wochenzeitung DIE ZEIT und der Robert Bosch Stiftung

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#### Kommentar zur Keynote von Naomi Orsekes (in englischer Sprache)

#### **Dr. Anna-Lena Scholz, Redakteurin Chancen, DIE ZEIT, Hamburg**

It is a pleasure and honor to be talking here, today. Thank you!

There's a sentence I've been hearing a lot lately: The universities need to open up. In fact, it's something I've been saying and writing myself more than once. What do we mean by this? We urge chancellors, professors, postdocs, students even, not to close themselves up to the public discourse. We call upon them: Be visible. Put your knowledge out there. Write books that hit the shopping mall. Be on TV. Use social media. Learn to use a language more simple. Advocate your values. And so forth. Don't be the ivory tower.

There's a promise behind these imperatives: If the university is open, everybody can get in. The promise is: If people can see what's going on inside, they will trust and understand the facts and the truth being produced by experts. I think that, indeed, with every scholar hiding from the public, and every university raising its walls, the scientific community becomes weaker. Yet, I also think there's something really great about the ivory tower: It's shiny and bright, and can be seen from afar. It gives orientation, if you get lost. I consider it extremely important for science and humanities to be seen – even to be looked up to: for their knowledge, their methods, their intellectual strength, and their values.

So, before one throws open all doors, one should make sure it's not too messy inside. As a journalist writing about higher education, science and humanities, I'm a frequent visitor of academic spaces. I'd like to point out three of those spaces, so to say, that – from my point of view – are not in such a good shape or do need, in fact, a whole new design. If science and humanities want to take responsibility for our society, as the topic of this first section suggests – Die Verantwortung der Wissenschaft – they need to take responsibility for themselves to begin with.

#### **1. No History of Science**

Do universities know where they are coming from? Do the institutions of higher education cultivate and maintain their own historical memory? How intensely does today's research reflect its own past – the epistemological shifts it produces and is framed by itself?

Having just listened to Naomi Oreskes, it's actually quite easy to make a point for the importance of this academic discipline – “the history of science”. It is crucial for anyone belonging to a university, be they students or professors or chancellors, to learn, that and how the production of “knowledge” is deeply intertwined with the political, economical, cultural, geographical, even religious state a society is in. Our knowledge has changed, it will continue to do so, and the scholars in the field of science history keep track. They are experts in explaining to society the amazing benefits science has brought to all of us – and why, at the same time, there is no such thing as an ultimate fact never to be taken into consideration again. The humanities in general are the ones who help us understand who we are and how we got here.

Unfortunately, there's hardly any history of science being taught in Germany. In fact, the field is shrinking. In 1997, there were 28 professorships in this field; in 2015, only 17,5 were left. There are 426 universities in Germany; only 15 offer positions in science history. The field is officially listed as a “Small Subject”, Kleines Fach, in other words: it is endangered, or at the risk of extinction. Being a “small subject” is no fate. I wonder: Are members of the universities okay with their very own history being this underestimated?

## **2. Rocket Science**

We all just heard it: Facts don't speak for themselves. They need to be explained by somebody. Who is this somebody? From my experience, scholars are eager to talk about their research. They know a lot of stuff about whatever topic is filling the newspaper and Twitter feed every day. They could explain the world. However – they are not trained to talk to the public. If you've been locked up in a lab three years, or if you spent the last five years in an archive, it really is not that easy to explain your insights to a journalist in two minutes. It takes confidence, to speak live on the radio or TV. It takes practice, to do so in short, precise sentences. It takes effort to write an essay for the newspaper that does not sound like a scientific paper. It takes experience, to know journalists one trusts. And: Being a science communicator takes time.

Professors don't have time. They have a million things to do, and being a promoter of their scientific field is not their priority. Which is okay. That means, somebody else has to do the job, or *help* the scholar do it herself. That's where the university management gets in. Do they give the topic as much attention and money as it needs? For once they much stronger needed to support their media and communications team: financially and symbolically. The transfer of academic knowledge into media and society is a top-notch job one should hire top-notch people for. From my observation, a lot is happening in this field these days. Also scholars seem to worry less and less that speaking out publicly may undermine their credibility.

Second, as I have just said, most scientists are not trained to talk to the media or – and this is just as important – to politicians and people in public policy. Why not make this an integral part of higher education? Talking about research in an interesting, trustworthy way is no rocket science. It can be taught and learned in seminars. One thing is crucial though: The time and effort a scholar invests in communicating with the media, the public and policy makers needs to be taken serious as actual work. It belongs on the CV, and this CV needs to be appreciated by whoever is hiring this scholar.

### **3. Is it a man's world?**

The March for Science was great. Why? It showed that scholars are not to be trifled with. They decided to strike back and take responsibility for their work and their values. Human Rights. Democracy. Equality. Internationalization. Fearlessness of The Other. I couldn't help but get the feeling though, that the academic world, in this movement, was portrayed as being quite a little greater than it actually is in everyday life. Academia can be undemocratic and unjust and feeding on its own privileges. Think of the many teaching positions especially held by young people, who are not paid well. Or one could talk about the social segregation in academia: There are still much less students, postdocs, professors, let alone say chancellors, who have a working class or migration background. Or one could talk about the number of women who, in Germany, hold full professorships – 23 percent –, or women who are leading a university – 18 percent –, or women who are the director of an academy of sciences – zero percent.

Homogeneity is a problem for academia. The subject we're discussing at this conference is not only about facts, and how to convey them. If universities are facing a hostile environment, if society does not trust research, then we are talking about nothing less than a colliding set of values. So, how does one deprive the "merchants of doubt" of their capital? By changing the framework of their discourse, and by addressing what really is at stake. Not only articulating, but actually pursuing academic values, I think, is a way of getting there. Might something so simple as hiring and supporting more female scholars not be a way to do so? Yes. It's part of what needs to be done. Universities should be a model for society. They should show, what is possible, and how to make it work: They should be diverse, and fair, and inclusive, and self-reflexive, and not be afraid of the questions that need to be answered – or which they don't have answers for, yet.

Thank you very much.