

“It is not always easy for amateurs to filter the right things out of the internet”

Biologist Volker Stollorz is a science journalist who heads the Science Media Center Germany, an independent source of scientific information. His organisation offers specialised knowledge and estimations to journalists whenever science hits the headlines.

Volker Stollorz, how has the internet changed the way amateurs and journalists access scientific information in your view?

The acquisition of knowledge has been democratised. Scientific knowledge is more freely accessible nowadays. When I started work as a science journalist in 1992, there was virtually no internet. We needed the “Oeckl” for our research, an address directory of important public institutions. You called up and if you were lucky, you got an expert on the line who could help you. The search for experts has become much easier for journalists and for amateurs too.

The BfR is involved with the risks of consumer products, food and chemicals. How has public perception changed?

What’s new is that the BfR as a scientific institution can communicate directly with the public through the internet, whereas journalists used to be required to open doors. With some scientific institutes, I get the impression today that they believe simply putting their content into the web and twittering is effective scientific communication which the general public will access. That is of course only very rarely the case. Reaching the general public is an art generally to be found in journalism.

The internet has facilitated access to knowledge – does this have disadvantages too?

In their dealings with science, amateurs and often professional journalists too are easily susceptible to the illusion that they believe to have understood something without this actually being the case. They are not aware of their own incompetence in the assessment of knowledge. Filtering out what is correct, important and helpful in the decision-making process from the flood of information that circulates in the internet is not easy for the layman. It can work, but it can also fail spectacularly.

What can be done about this?

What is needed above all is trustworthy institutions through which correct and important information is made available and which provide credible evidence. You still have to find them then, however, in the “jungle” of the internet, because a lot of interest groups with plenty of resources are in there too. They don’t care about correct, important and useful information, all they are concerned with is advertising and in the worst cases, disinformation. Journalism as the gatekeeper used to simply filter out a lot of the “information rubbish”. People who look on the crisis in the journalistic media today with schadenfreude should remember this.

Apropos fake news: where is the border between freedom of expression and the intentional spreading of fallacy?

I’m not a fan of that expression, I prefer to talk about disinformation along the lines of “science doesn’t know exactly either, so we should just do nothing to begin with”. The tobacco industry was tremendously effective here when dealing with the health risks of passive smoking. Of course we have to distinguish between opinion and information. There is no law that prevents people from believing complete scientific nonsense, but deliberately spreading false information to a massive extent doesn’t come under the freedom to express an opinion in my view. There are limits here. A pharmaceuticals manufacturer isn’t allowed to claim either that his drug can cure cancer if this is not the case.

Is fake news not a bit outdated? People have always concealed, twisted or falsified the facts when it suited them.

Without a doubt, there has always been propaganda. Today, however, it is possible to approach certain population groups online without the rest of the world finding



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out about it. Everyone in social media lives in their own little bubble where they are fed with special “information” and are no longer directly involved with the opinions of others. I think this will be extremely dangerous for democracy if we don’t learn to do something about it.

The media is being criticised too; they are being accused of partiality and manipulation. Should that not be a cause for reflection?

The struggle for clicks puts serious journalism under pressure. It is not possible to procure scientifically sound information within a short space of time – we’re talking about seconds here sometimes – or to get credible experts in front of a microphone. As two institutions obliged to search for the truth, journalism and science are basically in a similar position here.

In what way?

Science may not simplify complex information either to the extent that it is ultimately wrong. It also has to communicate uncertainty, because science also has to contend with a loss of trust. It is often accused of being “bought”. If it is not about the search for reliable knowledge, however, and the only discussion is about the struggle of interests, then democratic communication is no longer possible. ■

More information:
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