

Journalism and Scientific Evidence

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The research project analyzes the role of mass media and journalists in the emergence of public for scientific topics. The project focuses on topics and protagonists of journalistic communication about science – particularly with regard to its dealing with **scientific uncertainty**.



Basic considerations: Fragility of scientific evidences

- › on the one hand: constant lack of information for journalists (uncertainty)
- › on the other hand: conflicting evidences extraordinarily newsworthy

Leading research question:

One main function of journalism is to communicate current and relevant facts as well as verified information:
How does the mass media deal with the uncertain and provisional nature of scientific knowledge?

Potential of the research project:

- › thorough information about the public presentation of scientific knowledge
- › in-depth insights into the transformation of fragile evidences into apparent knowledge at the interface between experts and laymen

Dimensions and questions of research

Protagonists in mass media:

- › How do science journalists deal with the fragility of scientific knowledge?
- › Which strategies do they apply when selecting topics?
- › How do they inform themselves of uncertain topics?
- › How do they judge different scientific sources?

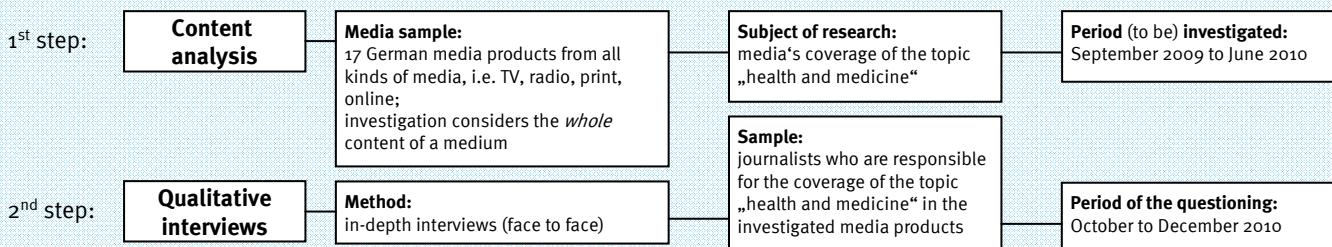
Media organizations:

- › Which organizational demands shape the dealing with scientific evidence in mass media's science coverage?

Media content:

- › In which way are fragile and conflicting evidences of scientific research presented in mass media's science coverage?
- › Which strategies and patterns can be identified?

Method



First findings*

- › Most stories about medical topics do not refer to the uncertain nature of scientific knowledge, but appear certain.

„Beer protects women from osteoporosis!“ (Bild-Zeitung, 19/09/2009)

- › Only a very few stories treat scientific uncertainty as their main topic.

- › In those cases in which journalists refer to the fragility of scientific knowledge they use different patterns; especially:

- They refrain from certainty claims by referring to „experts“:

„According to experts damage can exceed benefits.“ (Tagesspiegel, 18/09/2009)

- They explicitly express scepticism about a scientific issue:

„It is dubious how hormones can lead to death through lung cancer.“ (Süddeutsche Zeitung 22/09/2009)

- They confront experts with counter-experts (who are not necessarily scientists).

- Their wording indicates some kind of uncertainty:

„[...] but even they might be irritating to the sculp.“ (Süddeutsche Zeitung 16/09/2009)

- › In most cases uncertainty is explained with the provisional nature of scientific findings; this is usually presented as a characteristic feature of science and therefore not scandalized.

* Findings from a qualitative analysis of the coverage of five papers (sample period: two weeks in September 2009)