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High degrees and low payment

Study highlights and analyses difficult working conditions for Austrian science journalists • First study on this scale in Europe • Support messages from Eric Kandel, Haim Harari and Philip Campbell

Today, the Austrian Association of Education and Science Journalists presented a study on the working and training conditions of Austrian education and science journalists. The study was commissioned by the Austrian Association and conducted by Medienhaus Wien. Survey period was between January and February 2013. n = 100. Our definition of science journalists included journalists working for the education section as well, and excluded bloggers and other forms of non-professional actors. The key findings:

I. Professional characteristics: Science journalists are experienced and have high formal education.

65% of Austrian science journalists have an academic degree – this is nearly twice as high as journalists from other beats. However, few science journalists have studied medicine or natural sciences – subjects they most frequently cover – nor do they often participate in further education or post-graduate courses.

II. Journalistic perception: Science journalists see themselves as disseminators of information.

They see their role as unbiased disseminators: they want to explain complex matters, inform the audience in a nonpartisan and precise manner and describe reality as it is. Critique and control of the economy and politics is not of as much interest to them as it may be to their colleagues from other beats.

III. Job situation: Work pressure and perceived job insecurity are high.

Both, work pressure and the insecure financial situation, burdens Austrian science journalists. Considering their high workload and longer than average experience in the job, many science journalists are underpaid. While the average level of job insecurity is relatively high, 1 in 4 is (highly) anxious on that topic.

IV. Employment circumstances: Science journalism in Austria is severely marked by precarious employment circumstances.

The percentage of freelance science journalists in Austria is quite high (41%) – far higher than in other beats. Many science journalists cannot make a living from their profession and rely on side jobs, e.g. in PR. This leads to conflicts of interest.

V. Sources and work routine: There are severe limits on background research time.

Difficult (see point IV) and fragmented working conditions undermine the research processes. Science journalists are reduced to using easily and quickly available sources (news agency reports, news alerts etc.). Research is done quickly, preferable by telephone or online research.

For further information download the [study](#) (2 MB / in German only) or contact chairperson Oliver Lehmann at ol@oliver.lehmann.at

Selection of support statements

Haim Harari (Theoretical physicist; former long-term President of the Weizmann Institute; Chairman of the Executive Committee of IST Austria)

As long as science was a matter of interest only to a small scientific elite, and advanced education was not a privilege acquired by many, science and education journalism was an enriching activity, without a substantial economic and social impact. But in an era in which knowledge, particularly scientific and technological, is the most significant economic asset, exceeding the value of any natural resources, numerous non-scientists, political leaders and ordinary citizens, are often involved in considering and making decisions regarding science related issues. Thus, science and education must be a crucial concern for every thinking citizen. Today, even the survival of democracy and the health of our social fabric, require a certain minimal level of science education for all citizens. Progressive, responsible and well informed media reports, regarding science and education issues, are therefore an indispensable asset for a modern knowledge society.

Eric Kandel (Neuroscientist; Columbia University, New York City; Nobel Laureate Medicine 2000)

We live in a complex world surrounded by a variety of newly developed technological advances, both computational and biological, that bear on our everyday existence and well-being. In a democratic society we need to have an informed citizenship that can make thoughtful decisions about encouraging or restricting the use and application of these technologies. It is the function of educational institutions and science journalism to make clear to the scientifically uninformed person on the street the workings of those technologies, their strengths as well as their weaknesses, their advantages as well as their dangers. In addition, science is importantly supported by governmental funds. It is therefore essential for science journalists and institutions to make the case to the public that science has great value for the economy, for the health of our population, and for the sheer value of knowledge.

Philip Campbell (Editor-in-Chief, *Nature*)

Science is above all about discovery. Education and science journalism should above all be about discovery too. Education should teach people to explore with self-confidence not only facts and related evidence but also the factors - intellectual, social, emotional - that underlie



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and surround those facts. Science journalism should also be about discovery: revealing not only hidden facts and their uncertainties but also the intellectual and human circumstances and values that lie within and around them.

Barbara Drillsma (President of the European Union of Science Journalists' Associations)

Science journalism is in a state of crisis. Too many jobs are being lost with PhD students being asked to write science stories from published research papers in an effort to save money. This is incredible as a responsible science journalist plays a vital role in linking science with various stakeholders. He or she knows how to ask the right questions, will not be fed the "party line" and refuses to act as a mere loudspeaker

The fight back has started. EUSJA is looking into proper, structured, intense training for new science journalists, maybe leading to a recognised qualification similar to that of the UK's NCTJ - National Council for the Training of Journalists. This international body is also working hard to raise its profile amongst EU decision makers and the scientific and educational industries.

Therefore, I applaud the initiative of the Austrian association of education and science journalists. This study is the first survey on this scale in Europe. It will contribute to our current discussions and enhance our strategies to deal with this situation.