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#Ganeshatour:

The Study of Religions and Infotainment on Instagram

1 Introduction

High above the rooftops of Marburg resides a treasure that many people pass by without noticing: the Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung) at Philipps-University Marburg. Its employees make steady efforts to attract people's attention, to bring them closer to religious objects, their stories and the study of religions. They offer exhibition catalogues, public tours and talks. However, the way up to the collection is challenging, and there are times when the objects remain alone and their stories untold. As these stories are worth hearing, the REDIM project decided that if the public would not go to the objects, the objects must be brought to the public. And thus, external science communication¹ became a vital element of REDIM's work.

REDIM – Dynamics of Religious Things in Museums is an interdisciplinary project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF). The BMBF requires REDIM to engage in science communication in return for funding². This is no isolated case. Indeed, the Volkswagen Stiftung recently announced a new programme that specifically supports science communication. Its programme description emphasises that science communication is a way to influence public debate and can have a great impact on how education and research is perceived by the non-academic public.³ As this example shows, science communication is increasingly required as an

1 The term 'science communication' is used to refer to both communication among scholars, and communication between scholars and the public. In this paper, we focus more on the latter, that is, external science communication.

2 In 2019, the BMBF recognised the importance of science communication by publishing a policy paper about the strategy: Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF), *Grundsatzpapier des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung zur Wissenschaftskommunikation* (Berlin: BMBF, 2019).

3 "Wissenschaftskommunikation hoch drei – Zentren für Wissenschaftskommunikationsforschung, Volkswagen Stiftung," Volkswagenstiftung, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/unsere-foerderung/unsere-foerderangebot-im-ueberblick/wissenschaftskommunikation-hoch-drei-zentren-fuer-wissenschaftskommunikationsforschung>.



Figure 1: Profile picture of ganeshaontour. Photo: Georg Dörr, © Religionskundliche Sammlung Philipps-Universität Marburg.

aspect of academic work. In this paper, we argue why and in what way science communication is crucial, including for the study of religions.

As the study of religions is a small discipline, external science communication provides a great opportunity to broaden its reach and societal influence. Additionally, communicating academic research and results to a wider audience, and particularly to those outside the academic community, can be regarded as a democratic ideal. Therefore, in this paper, we show that science communication is in the interest of the study of religions and beneficial to a democratic society. In the following, we first present various arguments for external science communication in the study of religions (Section 2). In a second step, we briefly explain the key elements of science communication (Section 3). We then introduce Instagram as a potential medium for science communication in the study of religions (Section 4), before describing REDIM's work using Instagram (Section 5). In Section 6,

we discuss the challenges, risks, and limits of science communication. Finally, we summarise our arguments (Section 7).

2 The Study of Religions and the Public Sphere

The field of the study of religions is a broad one, but the focus of individual scholars' research is necessarily quite narrow. From time to time, academics and institutes of the study of religions are asked to make a public statement on a subject related to religion. In many cases, the interests of the inquirer and the particular expertise of the academic or institution do not entirely align. As a result, scholars are understandably wary of making public statements. Despite this, it makes sense for scholars with expertise on religions to communicate publicly on matters of religion. There are three main reasons why it is desirable for scholars of the study of religions to communicate with the public.

Firstly, scholars of the study of religions are experts in their fields and should communicate their expertise to the public.⁴ This is particularly relevant at a time when matters related to religion tend to comprise a large portion of the news. Scholars can contribute to making heated and emotional discussions more objective by offering empirically grounded information and putting facts into perspective with their comparative knowledge about religions.⁵

Secondly, communicating research to the public is a matter of accessibility, fairness and equality. In a democratic and meritocratic society, in which academic research is publicly funded, people have a right to access knowledge, and need this knowledge in order to take an appropriate, fact-based approach to religions. There are at least two ways that academic knowledge and perspectives from the study of religions can be conveyed to the public: through teachers of religion in schools and through science communication. The German Association for the Study of Religions (Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft, DVRW) recognises that teachers of religion in schools are engaged in a serious area of work within the study of religions. To this end, it has established a dedicated working group *Religionswissenschaft und Schule* (Study of religions and schools). In a similar vein, the

4 cf. Edith Franke, "Feministische Kritik an Wissenschaft und Religion," in *Kritik an Religionen: Religionswissenschaft und der kritische Umgang mit Religionen*, ed. Gritt Maria Klinkhammer et al. (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1997), 115 and 119 and cf. Jens Schlieter, "Religion, Religionswissenschaft und Normativität," in *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 237f.

5 Birgit Stark, "Wissenschaftskommunikation in Zeiten rapiden Medienwandels," *Science Policy Paper* 4 (2019): 4, urn:nbn:de:hebis:30:3-478543.

DVRW has acknowledged the importance of science communication by signing a statement regarding the BMBF's policy paper on science communication.⁶ Scholars who engage in external science communication face certain challenges and will inevitably have to leave their academic comfort zone. Given that teachers of religion in schools succeed in doing this every day, we can assume that this is also possible for scholars engaging in science communication.

Thirdly, communication with the public can increase the popularity of academic research in general and of a specific academic discipline in particular. The study of religions is a small discipline, which at some universities has to fear for its continued existence. As such, the discipline should be interested in increasing its own visibility. Through science communication, the discipline can point out the direct social relevance of its research. Furthermore, it can show that the study of religions contributes to the understanding of historical correlations.

Ultimately, by engaging proactively in science communication, scholars can ensure that the relevant and interesting topics they bring to the public's attention are those on which sufficient expertise is available. Scholars then do not have to wait for a journalist to ask a question that they feel competent to answer. Instead, they can talk about matters that they consider important and are able to explain properly in view of their expertise.

3 The Tool: Science Communication

Science communication is a tool that brings academic knowledge and discussion into the public sphere. It is both an autonomous discipline and an established tool for high-ranking scientific institutions, with the overall goal of providing academic content in broadly understandable language for everyone to learn and enjoy.⁷

6 "Positionierung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft (DGPK) und der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DGS) zum Grundsatzpapier des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) zur Wissenschaftskommunikation," Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft (DGPK) und Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DGS), Stuttgart and Essen: DGPK and DGS, published August 8, 2020, https://www.dvrw.uni-hannover.de/fileadmin/dvrw/Dateien/Beschluesse/Stellungnahme_WissKomm_DGPK_DGS_2020-1.pdf.

7 Hunter Hines and Sally Warring, "How We Use Instagram to Communicate Microbiology to the Public: Social Media is a Powerful Tool for Science Communication," accessed March 22, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00493-3> and Nina Janich, "Warum Wissenschaftskommunikation manchmal so schwer ist...Und auch deren Bewertung," *Science Policy Paper* 4 (2019): 11–16, urn:nbn:de:hebis:30:3-478543.

Successful science communication follows two major principles:⁸ Firstly, academic content is best published in a conversational manner. Secondly, it is important to publish content that can be referred to as *infotainment*, a term used today to describe media that conveys information in an entertaining fashion. The term *infotainment* was popularised by media theorist Neil Postman in 1985.⁹ Postman criticised the use of audiovisual stimuli on television, claiming that information was not absorbed by users as it was undermined by entertaining aspects on the news such as jingles.¹⁰ The perception of infotainment, which today also encompasses social media, has fundamentally changed since the mid-1980s. It is now seen as something positive, and a means of increasing democratic participation. For several reasons, infotainment is a thriving communication strategy: The first and most important reason is that complex facts are easier to comprehend if they are delivered in a relaxed fashion. If the strategy of infotainment is applied, the user is more likely to absorb the information contained in the digital communication.¹¹

High-ranking scientific institutions like NASA, MIT, Caltech, and Harvard Medical have been using science communication for years to bring their knowledge into the public sphere, and with good reason. These institutions are taking advantage of what media studies describes as ‘always-on-mentality’.¹² According to The Global Digital Report 2019, three-quarters of the German population spend at least three hours online every day. Globally, people spend even more time online: an average of six hours and 42 minutes per day.¹³ The report concludes that half of this time is spent on one’s smartphone.¹⁴ Today, media access is autonomous and individual; anyone can consume anything anywhere at any time. This allows some information *to go viral*, as digital media is fast and can potentially be seen by a very high number of people. As such, people can learn about new trends and topics within seconds. According to media science scholar Birgit Stark, modern media usage may be as ground-breaking as the innovation of printing was.¹⁵ Aca-

8 See Hines and Warring, “How We Use Instagram to Communicate Microbiology to the Public: Social Media is a Powerful Tool for Science Communication”.

9 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985).

10 *Ibid.*, 122.

11 “Infotainment,” *Online Marketing Fans*, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://onlinemarketingfans.de/lexikon-online-marketing/infotainment/>.

12 Stark, *Wissenschaftskommunikation in Zeiten rapiden Medienwandels*, 2.

13 “Digital 2019: Global Internet Use Accelerates,” *We Are Social*, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2019/01/digital-2019-global-internet-use-accelerates>.

14 Stark, *Wissenschaftskommunikation in Zeiten rapiden Medienwandels*, 2.

15 *Ibid.*, 3.

demic institutions should use this opportunity to convey their knowledge to the public and thus fulfil their public duty.¹⁶

While communicating academic hypotheses and findings to the public is an abstract, democratic, and moral ideal, it is also true that the consumption of academic research has become quite popular. This is evidenced by the number of followers science communication channels have, as well as audience television ratings – although currently, this is more true for the natural sciences than for the humanities. The popularity of both the natural sciences and the humanities can be confirmed by public tenders that call for science communication. Science communication can also be beneficial to institutions and academics as it can lead to new cooperation and help with professional networking. For example, when another museum became aware of REDIM's Instagram account, it offered some of its objects to one of the museums involved in the REDIM project. The transparency and visibility provided by science communication could also potentially increase scholars' academic reputation and popularity.¹⁷

4 The Medium: Instagram

For the reasons described above, in March 2019 the REDIM coordination team started trialling science communication via Instagram. There is a whole range of platforms that can be used for science communication. Twitter, for example, is a very popular platform for science communication. The scholar of the study of religions Frederik Elwert (@felwert) and the digital library *Relbib* (@rel_bib) have been using the social media platform regularly for their scientific communication. The *Netzwerk un-sichtbar*¹⁸, which was initiated a few years ago by students of the study of religions at the University of Leipzig and has since expanded to other cities in Germany and Switzerland, uses its website and the app *audioguideMe* to provide audio clips on the acoustic presence of religions in urban space. The network thus offers a very promising variant of scientific communication in the field of the study of religions.

The REDIM coordination team decided to use Instagram, which is primarily used to share photos and videos. Unlike the aforementioned *Netzwerk un-sichtbar*,

16 Ibid., 2.

17 Hines and Warring, "How We Use Instagram to Communicate Microbiology to the Public: Social Media is a Powerful Tool for Science Communication" and Stark, *Wissenschaftskommunikation in Zeiten rapiden Medienwandels*, 3.

18 "Netzwerk un-sichtbar: Religionswissenschaftlicher Wissenstransfer," *Netzwerk un-sichtbar*, accessed December 4, 2020, <https://un-sichtbar.hypotheses.org/>.

which deals with the acoustic expressions of religions, the REDIM project explores religious objects that are primarily perceived visually in museums. It is therefore appropriate to use Instagram, which mainly addresses the visual. Instagram users can add text of up to 2200 characters to the photos and videos they post. As such, it is possible to frame the users' interpretation of the pictures, to give additional information, and to build networks by using links and hashtags in the text. The text can provide both an interpretation of the image, and background information that is not contained in the image itself. Instagram's algorithm works like a positive feedback loop: The more users interact with one's content, the more the algorithm proposes it to other users who have not yet interacted with it.¹⁹ A suitable text alongside the content will promote this process and expand the channel's reach as people spend more time reading the text.²⁰ The medium, which is mostly consumed via smartphone and therefore provides 'content to go', is especially popular among students and young adults²¹ but also frequently used by scholarly institutions like universities and museums. For example, the individual project partners of REDIM and the partner museums, have been active on Instagram for some time. The medium is attractive as it relies on catchy (audio-) visual impressions that invite the user to share content with friends within seconds. In other words, using Instagram is a fun way to explore new content, and share memories and new impressions, in a fast and relaxed manner.²² Ultimately, by being online, the objects researched by the REDIM project can be enjoyed by a far wider public than offline.

To conclude, Instagram is suitable for REDIM's science communication, because the platform can be used to reach a broader audience and has an intuitive user interface. Instagram may well be thriving as a tool for science communication about objects because of its focus on the visual.

19 Hines and Warring, "How We Use Instagram to Communicate Microbiology to the Public: Social Media is a Powerful Tool for Science Communication".

20 Famous example: @humansofny.

21 "Instagram. Ein Schnappschuss aus dem Leben einer Walfamilie, Reisebilder des Mars-Rovers oder ein Selfie mit Roboter: Instagram eröffnet der Welt einen visuellen Zugang zur Wissenschaft," *Wissenschaftskommunikation.de*, accessed March 22, 2020, <https://www.wissenschaftskommunikation.de/format/instagram/>.

22 Hines and Warring, "How We Use Instagram to Communicate Microbiology to the Public: Social Media is a Powerful Tool for Science Communication".

5 The Channel: Ganeshaontour



Figure 2: The tour information has to be carefully organised. Photo: Ramona Jelinek-Menke.

What exactly do REDIM's activities on Instagram look like? How do we design infotainment for the study of religions and the REDIM project on Instagram?

The name of the REDIM channel is Ganeshaontour. A small metallic figure of the Hindu god Ganesha moderates the channel. The figure visits the various project partners one after the other and interviews the academic staff. In this way, Ganesha becomes the figure that connects the different aspects of the channel and makes it a continuing story. In the permanent posts and temporary stories, Ganesha asks REDIM's partners questions on a specific topic. For example, how did the museums in which research is carried out come to be established? How did things find their way into the museums

(18.10.2019–06.03.20, 10 posts)? Stories are also included, covering current topics and information about events related to the REDIM project such as the cleaning of a book by the Batak from Indonesia, and our online colloquium during the COVID-19 pandemic. By publishing these posts and stories, we aim to present our results and work in progress.

The REDIM coordination team write and edit the posts' texts, which follow the aforementioned principles of science communication – being both informative and entertaining. The team's main tasks are choosing a selection of the photos and transforming academic information into broadly comprehensible texts. Both the photos and the information are often provided by the research associates. The coordination team edit and post the content.

The common thread of the channel is provided by a stringent posting plan, which includes at least one post on a two-week basis. The REDIM coordination team constantly analyses its reach with the Instagram tool *Insights* and customises the

posts for current target groups. This strategy proved effective in terms of building followers and professional networking.

6 Challenges, Risks, and Limits of Science Communication

In addition to the many advantages of communicating with the public, one should also be aware of the challenges, risks, and limits of science communication. Some key challenges relate to the production of content. Firstly, it is not easy to provide academic content in an entertaining and relaxed fashion. The fact that social media platforms like Instagram only provide a certain number of characters within one post further complicates the challenge.

A further challenge is posed by the sheer volume of content that is uploaded to social media platforms, with every post competing for users' attention. To survive in this competition, it is necessary to deliver frequent, new, infotaining, personalised, free content for a diverse community.²³ By contrast, producing good scholarly content necessarily takes some time. It is essential that the texts we intend to post on Instagram always undergo a double fact check. It is our responsibility to only publish accurate content, and fact-checking also ensures that we avoid (justifiable) criticism from the academic community for publishing inaccurate information. It remains a permanent challenge to transform a scientifically accurate text into an infotaining and broadly understandable Instagram post. However, this challenge also has a positive side as you improve your writing skills through the necessity of conveying accurate content within a limited word count in a generally intelligible manner.

Researchers who engage in science communication face the well-founded fear of not being taken seriously by their academic peers and supervisors. There is a risk



Figure 3: Ganesha visits all of REDIM's associates. Photo: Edith Franke.

23 Stark, Wissenschaftskommunikation in Zeiten rapiden Medienwandels, 3.



Figure 4: Researching with curator Dr Susanne Rodemeier in the archives of the Museum of Religions. Photo: Ramona Jelinek-Menke.

that peers and supervisors will confuse generally understandable, entertaining texts with less professional depth. Indeed, Gertraud Kreamsner goes so far as to claim that academics have to unlearn how to speak in a generally understandable way in order to be accepted within academia.²⁴

Despite these challenges and risks, academic knowledge must find its way into the public sphere for the reasons already mentioned. We maintain that communication via social media is one of the proper instruments for this. Science communication needs competent academics who are willing to share their expertise and are capable of doing so in a generally intelligible manner. When scholars decide to engage in science communication, they should not be rejected by their peers

and supervisors for doing so.²⁵ It is likely that this risk will decrease considerably as we become more accustomed to this media form and its requirements. In a sense, we will have to re-learn to speak. However, all this requires not only goodwill, but also time – and time, as we all know, is money.

Let us now explore some of the limitations of science communication. As we have already stated, communicating ideas in a way that can be understood by a broader audience is a challenge for the academic community. Academic language is usually highly complex and can often only be understood by other academics, or even only by individuals within the same discipline. The use of discipline-specific terminology can even make interdisciplinary exchange difficult. Consequently, only a very small group can understand texts from a particular discipline.

24 Gertraud Kreamsner, "Der babylonische Turm und seine Grundfesten: Überlegungen zum Kommunizieren und Artikulieren im Kontext der Konstruktion von 'Anderen,'" in *Gesellschaften/Welten/Selbst im [Um]Bruch*, ed. Sabine Krause et al. (Wien: Online Publication by the University of Vienna), 76–79.

25 Stark, *Wissenschaftskommunikation in Zeiten rapiden Medienwandels*, 4.

Of course, dynamics within religions can be very complicated, and a certain vocabulary is needed to convey the correct information in a precise way. The solution certainly cannot be to abandon highly specialised terminology in academic texts. Consequently, procedures are necessary to make academic knowledge accessible to a broad public. It is hard to imagine that an academic who is already juggling research, publications, teaching and administration, could also engage in effective science communication. As we have emphasised, science communication is a very important and demanding task that involves a high degree of responsibility. It cannot be done 'on the side' and can only be carried out adequately by people who have both very good academic qualifications and

the necessary media skills.²⁶ To ensure the public has access to information as is their right, the task of sharing academic knowledge with the public should be placed in the hands of specialists whose focus is entirely on science communication. While individual researchers reporting on their work on social media is most welcome, this cannot be required of everyone. Ideally, dedicated science communication positions would be created within institutes and projects of the study of religions. Given that there are limited funds available for such positions, this will probably remain an unrealised ideal, which in turn means that the advantages science communication would bring to the discipline will be limited.

One limitation of science communication is that no matter how well it is done, it will probably only reach those who are already interested in the topic at hand. This raises the open question of how to attract the attention of individuals who



Figure 5: Researching in a library with RED-IM's doctoral student Pardis Eskandaripour. Photo: Pardis Eskandaripour.

²⁶ Here, we agree with the statement regarding science communication signed by the DVRW. "Positionierung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft (DGPuK) und der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DGS) zum Grundsatzpapier des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) zur Wissenschaftskommunikation," Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft (DGPuK) und Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DGS), Stuttgart and Essen: DGPuK and DGS.



Figure 6: Ganesha interviewing Ferdinand Liefert, a doctoral student at REDIM, and Ganesha from Japan about their research at Japanese museums. Photo: Maike Sieler.

are not already interested in the subject – an issue that by no means solely concerns the study of religions. We must also consider what successful communication on social media entails and how it can be measured. A high number of ‘followers’ and ‘likes’ cannot be the only criteria, as less popular content is no less important or legitimate.

A further sensitive issue is the commercial purpose of Instagram and other social media platforms. While anybody can enjoy content on these platforms, the content comes at the price of one’s personal data. As the Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated, personal data can be stolen and misused for political purposes.²⁷ When using any social media platform, that is always a risk.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that there are several positive outcomes of science communication. These positive effects not only affect one’s own research and the audience that learns about its results, but also the very discipline of the study of religions itself. The humanities, and academics within the humanities, are sometimes seen as an exclusive elite. Some doubt or even do not know that these academic disciplines conduct empirically grounded, comprehensible research that makes important contributions to society. By making our work more transparent, we can change this perception or prevent it from spreading. Science communication also serves to strengthen the democratic basis of our society, and can serve to calm heated debates by introducing empirically grounded information. It is not

²⁷ “Was wir über den Skandal um Facebook und Cambridge Analytica wissen [UPDATE],” Netzpolitik, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://netzpolitik.org/2018/cambridge-analytica-was-wir-ueber-das-groesste-datenleck-in-der-geschichte-von-facebook-wissen/>.

only possible but also important for scholars to write and talk about topics that fall outside their comfort zone as teachers of religion in schools do every day.

Science communication entails some risks and challenges, including being perceived negatively by one's academic peers, and writing about your academic work in a broadly understandable way without distorting the message. Nevertheless, we decided to give it a try. For the REDIM project, Instagram was the right tool for science communication as it relies on photos, related texts, and an algorithm that can work like a positive feedback loop. The project has received great feedback via Instagram, and communicates with an academic and non-academic community interested in topics of the study of religions. Concluding, we would argue that science communication (on Instagram) provides a great opportunity for the discipline of the study of religions to gain more popularity and to spread its knowledge. Science itself is the epitome of progress. So why not try to hop on this new train of opportunities?

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