

Quotation Marks and Gut Instinct?

Workshop on good scientific practice reveals uncertainties



Lively lecture: Miloš Vec (center) in action at the workshop entitled “Good scientific practice?” Also on the panel, plagiarism expert Volker Rieble (left) and legal historian Thomas Duve.

“Listing your sources is not as simple as many think. There’s a lot of advice to be had, but what is correct and useful?” Lea Heimbeck doesn’t generally give the impression of being clueless, but the doctoral student’s account at the MPI for European Legal History was received with widespread nodding. At least 20 budding junior scientists attended the workshop on “Good scientific practice?” with an intentionally provocative question mark in its title. The workshop was organized by the MPI in response to the call issued by the MPS ethics council following the Guttenberg affair to increase training efforts in this area.

There is a great deal of uncertainty, although one might think that many of the rules for scientific work must be established in writing somewhere. However, Volker Rieble, a labor law and plagiarism expert from Munich, confirms this: “I receive 150 e-mails every week with the words ‘I’ve got a citation problem.’” Skillfully approaching science as a social practice and pointing to blind spots in the current debate, separating legal and moral considerations from one another and looking at manners, conventions, trends and styles of the jurist as a solitary researcher, Miloš Vec offered a rousing tour de force through the thicket of standards, covering both quality and originality. The legal expert from the MPI, who also regularly works as a journalist, did not leave out the “attention industry of the media.” He described the academic discourse as a personal source of socialization, and proved that he himself is professionally adept at acting according to his own advice: thinking from a perspective of everyday work.

But how far will it get you? Is “ethics” even the correct word to use in connection with quotation difficulties, or should one rather speak of “techniques of the trade”? What

is proper, what is correct? Are the “Rules of Good Scientific Practice” of the Max Planck Society useful? Miloš Vec would at least like to see rules adapted to the different fields of research, and Volker Rieble, who considers the MPS rules “too general,” advocated minimum standards when it comes to citations.

The difficulties that doctoral students struggle with in practice were underscored by the survey Lea Heimbeck carried out ahead of the workshop – “in a desperate attempt to find clarity.” She asked 15 doctoral colleagues to mark the places in one and a half pages of text taken from her thesis that they thought required footnotes. The result was astonishing. “Some people expect footnotes in places where I state my own conclusions.” The number of suggestions for footnotes also varied from 5 to 15.

Volker Rieble offers a clear guiding principle: “Either you place footnotes only where you have used material from other sources, meaning that everything else is your own work, or you inform the reader linguistically, using phrases such as ‘I, on the other hand, think that’” But Lea Heimbeck still thinks that “this principle of highlighting anything foreign is somewhat absurd, as it is difficult to know where to draw the line. Where do my own thoughts begin on a subject that has already been covered by someone else?”

The fear of getting tangled up in this thicket is great – especially after she saw another female student have her untidy seminar paper graded 0 in her Ph.D. supervisor Miloš Vec’s seminar just one month before the Guttenberg case.

Lea Heimbeck is therefore happy that Miloš Vec and Thomas Duve work at the institute – two legal scholars who are aware of the difficulties, even if Volker Rieble wants to reduce the responsibility of the reviewers and the doctoral supervisors. “The author is responsible for his or her own work. Academia is not similar to sports, where the coach has to pass a drug test as well. Otherwise, we would become the probity police of higher education.”

In a sense, this part falls to Susanne Pelster and My-Sun Kim in the Deanery of Law at Goethe University Frankfurt. They reported that electronic plagiarism detection has been used on exam papers since 2006, and stated that, clearly, the students “are generally not very aware of the problems that arise when quoting Internet sources.” A frequently used argument for cases where similarly phrased passages occur in several students’ papers is “we worked on it together in the team.”

In a short lecture about the problems involved in interdisciplinary collaborative research, Thomas Duve explored the increasingly confused concept of authorship. Volker Rieble concluded the day with an evening lecture on the debate about scientific plagiarism and made a prediction: “There will eventually be consensus in this matter, because the scientific community prefers it that way.”

Twittering from Space

Tweeters in a typing frenzy: MPS makes use of DLR and ESA social media campaign

For German Aerospace Day on September 18, the European Space Agency (ESA) and the German Aerospace Center (DLR) invited 60 tweeters to Cologne. Michael Frewin, who is responsible for the Max Planck Society's Twitter channel, reported live @max-planckpress.

The universe: Infinite space. Unbroken silence. And then it goes "ping." When astronauts twitter, they have many readers on computers and mobile phones. The messages, phrases and images from space are distributed in a matter of seconds via social networks to the online community of aeronautics and aerospace buffs. There is not a rocket launch at NASA that is not reported live. Of course it is broadcast on TV, but it is also on Twitter, Facebook, etc.

The PR and communication strategists of the US space agency target nerds and journalists, who are usually active users of the social networks, and provide them with information. In Europe, this new type of corporate communication is still in its infancy, but it is growing fast. For example, in mid-September, the social media managers of ESA and DLR sent out invitations to the first European aerospace Tweetup. Of the 418 who registered their interest, 60 were given the opportunity to conduct exclusive interviews with astronauts in Cologne, listen to talks and



In the spotlight: ESA astronaut Paolo Nespoli (centre) obviously enjoys himself among his twitter fans. The Max Planck Society now also has its own Twitter Channel.

visit, among other things, the Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy (SOFIA), the Airbus 380 prototype and the European Astronaut Center (EAC).

An Aerospace Tweetup? It sounds very hip, and it follows a simple recipe: "You put 60 space freaks in a tent and feed them information," explains Michael Frewin, who twittered mainly about missions in which Max Planck took part. "The tweeters hardly speak to each other. They all try to report any news as it happens." Many of the participants had already attended similar events. To Michael Frewin, it was uncharted terrain: "serious geek territory."

Besides the technical details of an expedition, many people want to know more about everyday life in space. What does a flute sound like on the

ISS? What does a normal workday look like? Spellbound, the audience listens to the stories. "Astronauts have the same status as Nobel Laureates," Michael Frewin says. During the event, Michael Frewin sent 167 tweets, 43 of which were forwarded. In 54 cases, other tweeters replied, starting a conversation. During the campaign, around 35 new tweeters subscribed to the Max Planck Society's channel.

"The objective of the Society's participation in the SpaceTweetup was to get an idea of the utility of such social media campaigns for internal communication and events organized by the Max Planck Society," explains Felicitas von Aretin, Head of Corporate Communications. "In the future, we will incorporate small-scale social media reporting in our portfolio." It is especially useful for events that target young, media-savvy interest groups, and for dealing with highly newsworthy topics.

The Tweetup focused on the flying infrared observatory, SOFIA, which made an interim stop in Cologne.



Leading the German Field

14 ERC Starting Grants awarded to Max Planck researchers



Among the 14 scientists from Max Planck Institutes who received a Starting Grant from the European Research Council, two are women: Mirjam Ernestus (MPI for Psycholinguistics, left) and Elisabeth Binder (MPI of Psychiatry).

Following its fourth call for applications, the European Research Council (ERC) selected 480 talented young investigators who will receive research grants totaling around 670 million euros. Of these so-called Starting Grants, 64 were awarded to scientists working in Germany; 14 of them went to junior researchers at Max Planck Institutes.

An application to the research council is well worth the effort. Each Starting Grant recipient will receive up to two million euros over a period of five years. But the competition is stiff: the number of applications to the three ERC fields Life Sciences, Physical Sciences & Engineering, and Social Sciences & Humanities rose by 42 percent over the previous year, to 4,080 in 2011 (there were 2,873 applications in 2010). Nevertheless, Max Planck researchers performed above average. A total of 14 Starting Grants (including one that was awarded to a young female researcher at the Dutch MPI for Psycholinguistics, which is not listed in the German grant statistics) makes for a success rate of 22 percent, thus beating the EU average of 12 percent for successful applications.

This result puts the Max Planck Society right at the top in Germany. Other successful institutions include the Helmholtz Association (7 grants), University of Freiburg (5), TU München (4) and the Universities of Hanover and Bonn (3 grants each). Within the MPS, the MPI für Kohlenforschung and the Fritz Haber Institute did best: two scientists at each of these institutions secured the

sought-after distinction: Martin Sterrer and Alexandre Tkatchenko (FHI), and Manuel Alcarazo and Nuno Maulide (MPI für Kohlenforschung). The other recipients were: Elisabeth Binder (MPI of Psychiatry), Mirjam Ernestus (MPI for Psycholinguistics), Randolph Pohl (MPI of Quantum Optics), Paulo Freire (MPI for Radio Astronomy), Peer Fischer (MPI for the Science of Light), Stephan Grill (MPI of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics), Frank Jenko (MPI for Plasma Physics), Andrew Pospisilik (MPI of Immunobiology and Epigenetics), Björn Siemers (MPI for Ornithology) and Markus Zweckstetter (MPI for Biophysical Chemistry).

This makes the fourth call for applications the most successful one for the Max Planck Society. The 10 percent of successful applications in the first call in 2007 became 14 percent in the second call and 20 percent in the third. Among the 21 countries in which scientists received Starting Grants, Germany ranks second; first place is held by Great Britain, with 124 grants. Germany (64) is followed by France (57) and the Netherlands (47). A breakdown by nationality shows that German scientists received the most grants (83), ahead of the Brits (75).

Broadening Horizons, Making New Friends

"I loved the conference! Thank you for a great time." This quote comes from the feedback form of a doctoral student who took part in this year's international Ph.D. student symposium "Horizons in Molecular Biology" in Göttingen – and it sums up the impression of many of the 200 participants. Almost a bit sad, like parents saying goodbye to their children, the organizational team, consisting of about 20 doctoral students from the International Max Planck Research School for Molecular Biology, waved to the last departing speakers. They had all grown quite fond of each other during the mid-September conference.

Scientific exchange was at the heart of the symposium, and was ensured through lectures by renowned scientists, by the doctoral students themselves, and in poster sessions. Some of the speakers were delighted to be able to broaden their horizons in different areas of molecular biology, and many doctoral students initiated cooperation projects that will be valuable to their own scientific work, returning home full of new ideas.

The most important thing about Horizons, however, is that it is a conference by Ph.D. students for Ph.D. students.

Communication between students and speakers is thus stimulated through the many social activities. For example, they all met up in the free and easy atmosphere of a pub, and also went bowling together. The last evening of the conference was devoted to the traditional final party. Two further events characterized the symposium: on the initiative of immunobiologist Jon Yewdell, the wine and cheese soirée was accompanied by a jam session. "Connectomics," a special activity for promoting the exchange of ideas between young researchers and "old hands," provided around 50 doctoral students with the opportunity to chat with professors and receive some first-hand career advice.

After a year of preparations once the laboratory work of the day was finished, breakfast meetings in the still-empty cafeterias, and sometimes tattered nerves – when every hotel room in Göttingen appeared to be booked, for instance – the organizers can now relax and look back on the conference with satisfaction, thanks to the feedback forms. But the rest period is brief, as the preparations for 2012 will begin shortly: next year's conference is scheduled for September 10–13.