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VIRTUAL PRESS OFFICE AS AN EFFICIENT TOOL FOR SCIENTIFIC COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

The main goal of the following article is to **motivate Polish research units to take journalists into consideration in their external activities** – journalists are one of the key groups of recipients guaranteeing prestige and reaching various addressees. The author of this article thinks that **one of the basic ways of helping to achieve this goal is to take advantage of the website of an institution and publish there contents addressed to the media** (beginning with contact data for journalists). The author would like to encourage representatives of research and scientific organizations to analyse the websites of their institutions and search there for information enabling journalists to establish contact with a particular institution.

A starting point for the presentation of this subject are the author's own analyses, which were supposed to check how many Polish scientific units **take into consideration in their actions contacts with the media and address the needs of journalists**. For this purpose it was investigated, whether the websites of scientific institutions have sections dedicated to the media and whether they provide contact information for journalists, whether they post press announcements or other materials useful for the representatives of the media, as well as whether they present scientific workers as experts in their areas of work¹.

Poles' poor level of scientific knowledge

An inspiration to discuss this subject is the report on the state of scientific knowledge of inhabitants of selected European countries, published by the BBVA foundation (International Study on Scientific Culture Understanding Science²), according to the report Poland is near the bottom of the ranking. According to the author of this article, one of the reasons for poor level of knowledge about science among Poles may be **unfavourable image of national science in the society and the lack of flow of information between research units and recipients from outside the world of science, especially journalists**.

1 For the purpose of this analysis it was assumed that the list of employees of a scientific unit has to be located on a subpage dedicated to the media or be described as material for journalists, so that it could be said that a particular unit informs the media about the employed specialists. However, independent of this assumption, which is satisfied by only a few of the investigated websites, only few scientific units provide any database of their employees on their websites.

2 <http://www.fbbva.es/TLFU/dat/Understandingsciencenotalarga.pdf>, 1.09.2012.

The investigation has shown that respondents are far more interested in science than informed about scientific achievements. Moreover, in the hierarchy of subjects attracting strongest interest, scientific reports placed fourth, just behind health, economic and environmental issues and ahead of political matters, as well as international affairs³. Thus, the report has shown that **the demand for scientific knowledge is very strong.**

Polish science missing from the media

Where can a person interested in science find information about the achievements of Polish scientists? According to the author, one of the **essential providers of scientific information are the media.** This is confirmed by, among others, the aforementioned report, which shows that the most common source of information about science is television⁴. At the same time the experiences of the Polish tv watchers or press readers show that **more often than about Polish research, it is possible to learn about the results of scientific projects conducted by researchers in the USA, Canada or Australia.** However, this doesn't mean that Polish journalists prefer news from abroad. One of the reasons for that is the fact that in these countries scientific and research institutions pay much attention to providing recipients from outside the world of science with the effects of research projects in a possibly comprehensible and professional way. What proves the efficiency of these activities is that their effects have an international coverage.

Where should Polish journalists look for information about Polish science in order to provide the society with a comprehensive image of Polish scientific achievements? According to the author, research units themselves should take care of this matter. For this purpose they should, above all, use their websites – own websites, or in case of units functioning within the structures of higher education institutions, the website of their parent institutions.

Analysis of websites as a source of information for journalists

In September 2012 the websites of the best Polish research units were analyzed. The assumed criterion was the parametric assessment of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education prepared in 2011. Parametric assessment of research units covers, among others, quantity and quality of publications of scientists employed in a particular institution (publications in periodicals from the JCR list are exceptionally important), the number of international research projects and rights to grant scientific titles and degrees⁵. The survey covered 350 institutions, that is, all institutions of category 1, which means they have been classified as entities working most efficiently for the development of Polish economy and science⁶.

Research units, whose websites have been analyzed, come from 24 areas of research (including, among others: chemistry, building technology and architecture, mining, technical geology, geodesy, energy or economic sciences). Among them 213 function within university structures. The remaining 137 institutions

³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁵ www.nauka.gov.pl, 10.09.2012.

⁶ http://www.nauka.gov.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/Nauka/Sprawy_Nauki/20110105_Kategorie_jednostek_naukowych.pdf.

are units of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), research and development units and other scientific units (eg. International Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology, National Medicines Institute, or the Institute for Ferrous Metallurgy)⁷. In course of the survey the institutes' homepages were analyzed. In case of such scientific units as faculties, which function within the structure of a university, it was investigated first, whether they had their own websites and in case they didn't – homepages of their universities were checked (213 mentioned units function within 63 universities). In every case the analysis was based on the search for content addressed directly to journalists.

To sum it up⁸:

- In the survey all units classified as category I (350 in total), according to the parametric assessment of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (2011) were taken into consideration.
- Search for Internet websites of 137 units of the Polish Academy of Sciences, research and development units, other units, and 213 basic organizational units of universities was carried out.
- Almost all university units use the websites of their universities and for this reason 63 universities, within which 213 faculties with category I are functioning, are included in the analysis.

Contact data for the media

Where should the contact information for the media be located on websites? Should it be a "Contact" tab providing a general list of phone numbers, or should this data be located in other part of the website? Perhaps, it should be located in a tab titled most often as "press office", "media", "for the media" or "spokesperson"?

The analysis of websites of research units functioning outside university structures has shown that only 18 out of 137 have a "contact for the media" section. Apart from them only 3 provide on their homepage (in a general section titled "Contact") contact information of their spokesman or promotion office (eg. Institute of Turbomachines of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Gdańsk, National Centre for Nuclear Research in Świerk, Henryk Niewodniczański Institute of Nuclear Physics Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków, Central Mining Institute in Katowice, Instytut Matki i Dziecka in Warsaw).

Only 6 out of 213 scientific units located in the structures of universities (Faculty of Physics, University of Warsaw, Faculties of Physics, Astronomy and Applied Computer Science of the Jagiellonian University, Faculty of Management and Economics of the Gdańsk University of Technology, Faculty of Physics, Astronomy and Informatics of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Faculty of Construction, Mechanics and Petrochemistry of the Warsaw University of Technology in Płock, Faculty of Electronics and Information Technology of the Warsaw University of Technology) have own websites independent of their parent institutions' websites and provide contact information for the media and data prepared especially for journalists.

⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁸ *Ibidem.*

Information about the remaining 207 scientific units can be found on the websites of universities.

It turns out that among 63 universities taken into consideration in the research, 28 have a, for the media' tab and 11 provide contact data of their spokesman or promotion office in the "Contact" tab.

To sum it up, 116 scientific units (not functioning within the structures of universities, in other words, units of the Polish Academy of Sciences, research and development units and others) don't provide any content prepared especially for journalists, including even contact data for the media, on their websites. The situation is similar in case of 24 universities, which in their structures have scientific units classified as category I units, according to the parametric assessment of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

Announcements for the press

Experiences of the author herself show that preparing information for the media has a positive influence on the image of scientific units. A journalist, by means of a website, can at any moment and constantly follow the developments taking place at a particular institution. In case he gets interested in a particular subject, he can use fragments of the provided material or contact a representative of the institution. Knowing that the website is regularly updated, he will be eager to return to the website or order a newsletter with updates for the media.

Nevertheless, it turns out that only few scientific units provide journalists with such an opportunity. Analysis has shown that out of 137 scientific units outside university structures, 10 provide press announcements for the media (eg. Institute of Physics, Polish Academy of Sciences, Instytut Logistyki i Magazynowania in Poznań, Nencki Institute of Experimental Biology, Centrum Badań Kosmicznych PAN), and out of 63 which have category I scientific units, 16 do that (eg. University of Szczecin, Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Warsaw University of Life Sciences).

To sum it up, 127 scientific units (functioning outside university structures, that is, PAN units, research and development institutions and others) don't provide press announcements, which could inform journalists about the institutes' achievements or other important events (grants, subsidies, international cooperation, other achievements), on their websites. The situation is similar in case of websites of 47 universities which have scientific units classified as category I units, according to the parametric assessment of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

The author has many times heard the opinions of representatives of scientific units that journalists don't need separate contents and are able to find the needed information themselves on a particular website. However, taking into consideration what kind of information is usually posted on these websites and that most often no information is provided at all, it is hard to agree with this claim. It is necessary to pay attention not only to the selection and choice of information, which needs to take into consideration the needs of the media, but also to stylistic standards of press announcements, which substantially differ from the assumed standards of updates posted on websites.

Scientists as experts for the media

The characteristics of work of a Polish scientist are very complex, especially if he or she deals not only with scientific research but also with education. Thus, it is hard to expect that a typical Polish scientist should have time for appearance in the media. The experiences of the author show additionally that cooperation with the media, from the point of view of scientists, is associated with high risk caused by the characteristics of the functioning of the media. Nevertheless, this is not a place to elaborate on these characteristics.

Still, it is worth taking into consideration the fact that in every scientific unit there may be employees interested in popularizing specialist knowledge in the media. If there are no such employees, for the purposes of image-building, it is advisable to present the whole scientific staff together with its achievements, as usually scientists guarantee a particular research status for a unit and thus high parametric assessment.

The analysis of websites of scientific units functioning outside university structures has shown that none of them presents to the journalists the profiles and contact data of their employees and only 4 universities (among those which have scientific units classified as category I units, according to parametric assessment) provide journalists with a list of employees (Kozłowski University in Warsaw, Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences, Cracow University of Economics and University of Social Sciences and Humanities).

Summing up: A journalist who would like to learn about the staff of a particular scientific unit, read profiles of scientists and descriptions of their passions and achievements, can do that on the websites of only 4 universities, which have category I scientific units.

It is necessary to remark here that the author of this research has concluded that only a situation in which a list or database of scientific employees is located in the tab dedicated to the media can be regarded as a presentation of scientific employees addressed to the journalists. General lists of names, sometimes connected with a list of administrative employees, available on institutes' websites are not that valuable for the media any more. Nevertheless, even the above-mentioned general lists are rather uncommon.

Physics and astronomy top the list

It is worthwhile to link the above considerations with particular areas of science. Among 24 areas of science recognized as essential for the development of the economy and science, which ones are represented by units which pay most attention to promotion in the media? The answer is physics and astronomy. 8 scientific units from this area of science have sections for the media on their websites. This is the only area of science which in this respect stands out from all 24 branches. It is worth taking a look at these institutions; websites, especially, the websites of: Institute of Plasma Physics and Laser Microfusion in Warsaw, Centrum Badań Kosmicznych PAN in Warsaw, Institute of Physics Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, Henryk Niewodniczański Institute of Nuclear Physics Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków, Faculty of Physics of the University of Warsaw or the Faculty of Physics, Astronomy and Applied

Computer Science of the Jagiellonian University.

Other crucial areas of science are not presented that well to journalists. Other areas that could be distinguished are: economic sciences, mining, geodesy, energy and transport, as in each of these areas there are 3 to 4 scientific units which pay attention to the need of journalists for information on their websites.

There is not a single category I scientific unit from the areas of healthcare and physical education, historical sciences, art sciences, mathematics, foundations of computer science, as well as such areas as material, technical or security technologies and other general technical areas which provides a section for the media or takes the journalists' need for information into consideration.

Does it mean that every, even the smallest scientific unit should have information for the media on its website? In case of departments, institutes or faculties, it is enough to provide such information in one section of the website of a bigger organization (that is, university), which contains the above-mentioned units. However, if a particular unit has the opportunity to create own Internet resources, just as some of the entities mentioned in the analysis, like: Faculty of Physics of the University of Warsaw, Faculty of Physics, Astronomy and Applied Computer Science of the Jagiellonian University, Faculty of Management and Economics of the Gdańsk University of Technology, Faculty of Physics, Astronomy and Informatics of the Nicolaus Copernicus University, it is worth providing also information for journalists (the above-mentioned faculties do that).

What is the minimum amount of information that the website of a scientific unit which wants to address the media should contain? One of such pieces of information is contact data of a person who can help a journalist find the needed data. If a particular unit doesn't have a spokesperson or another employee dealing with contacts with the media, it should allocate the task of connecting journalists with the appropriate scientific employees to one of its employees. Without a person responsible for this issue, which could give the journalists the impression that they can get answers to their questions, there is a big risk that a particular research unit not only won't be shown in the media, but also that the prospects for such an opportunity will be lost. In this work the author doesn't want to start the subject of characteristics of cooperation with the media, as it doesn't belong to the discussed issue. However, at this point it is worth remembering it.

www.centrumprasowe.swps.pl as a benchmark

An example of a virtual press office, which provides the media with complex information is the press office created by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (SWPS) - one of the universities which have category I scientific units (SWPS Faculty in Wrocław or Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences SWPS in Warsaw).

The website contains all basic elements of a section for the media - contact information of the spokesperson, press announcements (including announcements concerning events and scientific research), list of scientific employees interested in cooperation with journalists, as well as all kinds of visual materials. The content is arranged on the website so that it clearly draws attention to the most important areas of

activity of the university. On the one hand it shows the most important areas of science, in which SWPS has highly qualified staff (here, psychology and culture studies), on the other hand – the areas of essential activities of the university are presented (the division of “Information for the press” section into tabs providing information about education, research, events and achievements of scientists and students). “Research centres” section contains the descriptions of research units, including laboratories, it presents the image of a university which has appropriate facilities and research equipment at its disposal.

Moreover, the arrangement of the website goes well beyond such standard elements thanks to:

- a database of experts prepared to satisfy the needs of the media – it contains the names of only those scientists and lecturers of SWPS who agree to and are interested in cooperation with the media. It presents short scientific profiles formulated in a comprehensible way, informing about issues that could be interesting for the media, it provides scientists’ e-mail addresses and contact data, together with the names of faculties and smaller units they belong to,
- press packages – can be found next to every expert (they contain small portrait photographs, including high resolution images for printed interviews; moreover, thanks to modern way of cropping, they build a modern image of scientists, who are usually photographed in serious poses and formal clothes),
- slide-show – a solution which involves the presentation of faces of scientists and lecturers from SWPS who are ready to comment on or give interviews for special occasions (eg. Children’s Day) or current events (eg. Euro 2012 or elections in the United States), which helps journalists find the experts they need,
- search engine for finding experts – allows finding quickly people specialized in a particular subject, using keywords eg. labour market, depression, areas of science (eg. psychology, sociology) or city, where a particular scientist can be found,
- inquiry form “ask an expert” - makes it possible to submit an inquiry about an expert from a particular area who would be suitable for a particular issue that needs commenting (in case the user doesn’t know a particular name) or directly about a particular expert (the option is available next to every name).

Websites

- <http://www.fbbva.es/TLFU/dat/Understandingsciencenotalarga.pdf>, 1.09.2012.
- www.nauka.gov.pl, 10.09.2012.
- http://www.nauka.gov.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/Nauka/Sprawy_Nauki/20110105_Kategorie_jednostek_naukowych.pdf.