

»Conspiracy theorists have the better stories«

Stephanie Dreyfürst champions improved communication of scientific topics through GWUP, the German Society for the Scientific Investigation of Parasciences.

How can mankind be to blame for climate change when it is only responsible for three per cent of CO₂ emissions? Can you provide an answer to this question off the cuff?

Off-the-cuff answers are rarely a good idea. Even if the speed we associate with the internet and the real-time stories on social media also seemingly result in people expecting statements and comments to be made off the cuff.

How do you react to such a question then?

I try to take away some of the pressure by saying: Let us sit down and calmly research what acknowledged experts and institutions that have been examining the science of climate change have to say on the subject. And in particular it pays to be sceptical if concrete figures are stated.

Those who are convinced that climate change is a man-made phenomenon but are not climate researchers are going to feel a little bit unsettled in such a situation. What should they do here?

If the climate change denier is someone they know well or don't feel indifferently about, then it is worth considering: is this person prepared to take a critical look at their own position? Ask them: what would it take to change your opinion? Are there sources or positions that could prompt you to do so? Some think about it and then say, maybe, but no, not really. In such cases you know that every word is a waste of breath. Then you could ask why they want to believe something. Many of them then start to give some thought to the matter and say: well, then I have less of a guilty conscience, because I have just bought an SUV. If someone believes that humans are not to blame for climate change anyway, this exonerates the individual.



Have you ever experienced someone pausing for a moment and then admitting why they refuse to believe the results provided by science?

Sometimes, yes. This is often related to the demeanour you adopt when addressing this person and how you speak to them. Nobody likes to be lectured, and nobody likes to be attacked for their convictions. This stirs up resistance, as people tend to want to save face. This means the friendlier and more understanding the approach you take to them, the greater the probability that the other person will not immediately go on the defensive. This has a lot to do with psychology and not primarily with facts at all. But this discussion and exploration on the human level is difficult to train. One tip is to maintain an authentic interest in the person with whom you are holding a discussion if you have got the impression it is worthwhile. But if someone is totally impervious to facts, then every word is a waste of time, the whole experience is just strenuous.

You are a member of the national executive board of GWUP, the Society for the Scientific Investigation of Parasciences. Each year this organisation hosts SkepKon, the sceptics conference, with a principal topic, yet is also open to answering questions. How frequently do you receive queries relating to climate change?

The queries go to our office in Roßdorf near Darmstadt, where we have our only full-time employee, Dr. Martin Mahner. I would estimate that everything relating to the topic of climate change, including alternative energies and also the question »is there such a thing as a perpetual motion machine«, to be perhaps ten per cent at most.

That is a considerable amount.

Yes, although in the strictest sense it is not a parascientific topic, but still so important for our future that we often place it on the agenda at our annual conference and try to find speakers able to address all possible aspects in the field of climate change and the production of green energy.

What are the concrete questions you receive?

Many people doubt the scenarios painted by climate research, for example the rise in sea levels and the melting of the ice caps and glaciers. Others would like support in placing findings and studies in an overall context.

How can one counter those who doubt that climate change is a man-made phenomenon?

You can say that even if climate change is not man-made, we still have to stop it because the consequences for mankind, for the planet, for the ecosystem are so catastrophic that it makes no difference what has caused climate change. And even if it should turn out that there is no such thing as man-made climate change, we would still be doing something good for the planet (and us) by switching over to using bicycles more, for example, and it would not have been in vain.

Is there a hit-list of the topics which play a role at GWUP?

At the moment the topics are often dominated by conspiracy theories. These have been given a further massive boost by the coronavirus crisis. Our record for new members has also been broken this year because we have become more well-known through the subject of conspiracy theories. We conduct research and check whether there is any truth in something. This ranges from claims made by conspiracy theorists Attila Hildmann (a chef) and Xavier Naidoo (a musician), through those by members of the anti-government *Reichsbürger* movement, to those by people denying the existence of the coronavirus.

Some of these things are so outrageous, for example the assertion that children are kidnapped to drink their blood. Do you also receive such questions?

As the director of Wiesbaden's Community College I just initiated a series of events focusing on facts, fake news, and conspiracy myths; it has led to some highly interesting experiences. Some of the lectures met with considerable resistance. For example on the subject of alleged satanic paedophilia, I received about 50 emails protesting about the event – but it could be verified that the protest had been organised. The lecture still took place.

Why is it so difficult for these people when they are confronted with reality?

If people firmly believe in something, then they tend to cling to this belief equally firmly. And if somebody comes along and tells them that none of it is true, then it hurts a lot. I like to compare this with the fairy tale »The emperor's new clothes«. Suddenly there is a small child saying that the emperor is not wearing anything at all. This destroys the illusion of a whole crowd of people whose beliefs are then shattered. Serving as someone who debunks beliefs and myths is a very thankless task, you have to have a very thick skin. For individuals at our organisation this is also no laughing matter as they have become the object of hostility and even faced threats of rape and murder.

But the event did not just attract protests?

No. There was considerable interest and we had fascinating discussions. A lot of the attendees gathered really practical information; they wanted to find out how they could tell that someone was talking nonsense. Or how to conduct research alone and find out whether images actually originate from a specific event or whether the images might be older and have been taken out of their original context. This is helping people to help themselves.

Both sides are increasing their digital weaponry.

At GWUP we have learnt a number of tricks over the years, and we are pleased to pass these tips on in lectures and articles. Those not yet familiar with Google Reverse Image Search or the fact-checking site Mimikama can discover a whole new world. You can see for yourself where an image or a story has already been published.

Has the youth movement »Fridays for Future« made a difference to the issue of climate change?

It has led to more interest, but also to more resistance. Resistance that is focused on Greta Thunberg in a very personal and derogatory manner. You have to ask yourself why people think it is okay to treat a young woman, who is still almost a child, in this manner when she actually just wants to cause positive change. We try to break up this black-and-white image a little and point out that the world is not easy to understand. The seductive aspect is that there are people presenting supposedly simple solutions to this complex world. If I do not understand something there is somebody there to take the burden off me personally by saying: No, no, climate change is not caused by us.



About Stephanie Dreyfürst

Stephanie Dreyfürst, 45, has a Ph.D. in German Literary Studies and was the founding Director of the Writing Centre at Goethe University for ten years. Since May 2020 she has been the Director of Wiesbaden's Community College, where she initiated a series of events in the autumn semester focusing on conspiracy theories and critical thinking.

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Why is it so difficult to communicate scientific findings on a broad basis? What needs to change?

Those wanting to achieve expertise in a small area have to make a lot of sacrifices, spend years reaching a level where they can say they are an expert in this area. Acquiring specialist expertise in the German university system and at the same time producing reader-oriented texts or informing the general public about one's own field is virtually impossible. Naturally there are notable exceptions such as Christian Drosten, who is an absolute expert yet is modest and always highlights the limits of his knowledge and his expertise.

But not everybody is Christian Drosten.

Yes. This is why more jobs should be created which focus on excellent external communication. If the world of science does not want to lose contact to the population – which is supposed to understand what science does and why – then we should earmark funding to give science a face and try to tell »good stories«. For this is what instinctively sets conspiracy theorists apart: they offer better stories. They are told in a more exciting manner and are packed full of emotion. We have to try and find a language which does not downplay science, but does not pose too much of a challenge for people, while making scientific findings intelligible, accessible and tangible.

The interview was conducted by Dr. Anke Sauter.