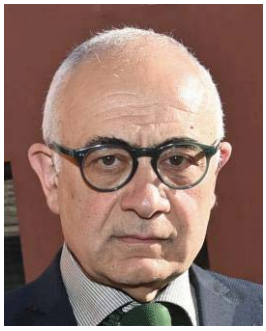
Where do the “experts” live? Universities, media and the role of the experts in the Italian context

Laura Solito; **Carlo Sorrentino**; **Letizia Materassi**; **Ester Macrì**

Recommended citation:

Solito, Laura; Sorrentino, Carlo; Materassi, Letizia; Macrì, Ester (2025). Abstract - "Where do the “experts” live? Universities, media and the role of the experts in the Italian context". In: Dinu, N. R.; Baiget, T. (eds.). *Divulgación, Transferencia e Impacto Social de la Ciencia*. Granada: Ediciones Profesionales de la Información. ISBN: 978-84-125757-2-9
https://doi.org/10.3145/codi2025/028

Laura Solito
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2353-3697
University of Florence
Department of Social and Political Sciences
Via delle Pandette, 21
50136 Firenze FI, Italia
laura.solito@unifi.it



Carlo Sorrentino
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8370-1923
University of Florence
Department of Social and Political Sciences
Via delle Pandette, 21
50136 Firenze FI, Italia
carlo.sorrentino@unifi.it

Letizia Materassi
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2302-7655
University of Florence
Department of Social and Political Sciences
Via delle Pandette, 21
50136 Firenze FI, Italia
letizia.materassi@unifi.it

Ester Macrì
University of Florence
Department of Social and Political Sciences
Via delle Pandette, 21
50136 Firenze FI, Italia
ester@retesviluppo.it

Abstract
Science communication is an increasing and meaningful part of the communication activities in the worldwide HEIs (Higher Education Institutions), linked to the so-called "third mission" of universities. It is not only a wider set of activities adopted to "translate" the scientific findings or to "spread" the knowledge among lay publics; firstly, it is a new perspective on science production, a different approach to the meaning of dissemination and a cultural matter that has a high impact on how science and scientists are represented and perceived by the Public Sphere. It calls into question the role of three different key-players: universities as organizations, scientists as experts and the media as institutions.

Several studies have investigated each of these actors individually, but the interrelation among them is still lacking. The contribution here presented aims at overwhelming the gap, investigating both dimensions, to explore, consequently, their reciprocal interaction and negotiation.

The study is part of a financed research project on the role of scientists in the media ecosystem and the crises of experts in the contemporary society, led by *University of Turin* and developed thanks to the participation of *University of Molise* and *University of Florence* and the collaboration of the main Italian press agency, *ANSA*. The specific goals of the Florentine unit are twofold.

On the one hand, we aim at investigating the different communication strategies and the relational behaviours adopted by universities to represent science and engage the internal and external communities; on the other hand, how journalistic media represent and frame science and experts, but also the organizations to which they belong.

If many studies have discussed the impact of science communication on society, suggesting specific measurement indicators, few of them seem to consider the interconnections between the communication strategies and the media representation of them, also in a long-term perspective.

The ongoing research that we are presenting attempts to investigate the Italian context. In the last years, in Italy as in many other Countries –for ex. USA, Canada, UK, etc.– a specific organization –*APEnet Association*– has been created in order to help universities in achieving their "third mission" aims, supporting the planning activities, fostering educational programmes, sharing national and international best practices and building a strategic network

ISBN: 978-84-125757-2-9

among the Universities. In order to follow the development of PE in the Italian Universities, *APEnetwork* publishes a “PE Barometer” periodically. From the last edition we have excerpted some quality indicators, such as the presence of dedicated human resources in the central organization, the availability of a specific budget for PE activities, the existence of some rewarding forms and of educational programs addressed to the internal community. Considering these different aspects, for example, we have traced many “good practices” and in the initial experimental step of the research, we have focused the attention on 3 of them: *University of Turin* (North Italy), *University of Bologna* (Centre) and *Politecnico of Bari* (South), exploring how they are managing the Third Mission activities and how they communicate them.

So, starting from this meaningful experiences and adopting the ministerial criteria, we have selected a wider representative sample of universities (n = 26), based on four dimensions:
- the size of the Athenaeums,
- their geographical collocation (North Italy – Centre – South and Islands),
- the organizational nature (public or private) and
- the position in the national ranking, selecting the top universities in 2023: *http://www.censis.it*

On the other side of the research, thanks to the collaboration with Ansa, we have selected the news (n = 1218) published on *ANSA web portal* (April 2019-2024), concerning 3 main topics: health, environment, and science & technology.

We are investigating the sample through 2 methods:

1. quali-quantative analysis of the contents of the institutional websites of the selected Universities, specifically addressed to public engagement activities, and of the news collected through the *ANSA* portal;
2. in-depth interviews to science communicators or public engagement experts in the selected universities to draw the state of the art of science communication in the Italian HEIs and to highlight the strategic orientations and the operative declinations of public engagement activities; in-depth interviews to journalists involved in the field of Science Communication in the main Italian Newspapers, in order to explore how they usually relate to HEIs and who are, from their point of view, the “experts”. If the first step is concluded, the second one is still an ongoing part of the research activities.

From the first highlight on the research findings related to the first part of the project, we are collecting some interesting suggestions. Far from the traditional “ivory tower” model, nowadays science communication constitutes a new challenging opportunity to the missions and the identities of universities; at the same time, it is also an opportunity to reshape the relationships within their internal and external communities in an embedded collaboration. Universities seem to be aware about their “social” role and, especially after the pandemic, we have noticed a proliferation of communication activities and dedicated media outlets. At the same time, we aren’t perceiving the presence of a shared communication strategy, and it will be interesting investigating whether this perception is confirmed in the second qualitative part of the study that we will have been developing for the next months.

ISBN: 978-84-125757-2-9

As concerning the news contents, we could profile the "experts" mentioned by *ANSA*: they are very often Academics (60.92%) or for-profit organization's employees (17%), generically called "researcher", independently from her/his academic status, or with their institutional role (President, Director, Dean, etc.). Most of them are involved in health-related research (46,96%) or in STEM disciplinary (42,45%) and their works are published in a scientific journal or review (65,11%). This seems to be an important "marker" of the expert's visibility, and many collected articles stress the importance of the research' results publication, which seems to constitute a selection criterion of the news. But this findings worths a deepener understanding that the research team will have been investigating with the second step of the research.

Keywords
Science communication; Media; Experts; Public engagement; Public communication; Representation; Communication strategies; Public sphere.

References

Bonney, Rick; **Cooper, Caren B.**; **Dickinson, Janis L.**; **Kelling, Steve**; **Phillips, Tina**; **Rosenberg, Kenneth V.**; **Shirk, Jennifer** (2009). Citizen science: a developing tool for expanding science knowledge and scientific literacy. *BioScience*, *59*(11), 977-984. *https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2009.59.11.9*

Caselli, Davide (2020). *Esperti. Come studiarli e perché*. Carocci, Roma.

Giddens, Anthony (1990). *The consequences of modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford

Marín-González, Esther; **Navalhas, Inês**; **Dijkstra, Anne M.**; **De Jong, Anouk**; **Luís, Cristina** (2023). Science journalism in pandemic times: perspectives on the science-media relationship from COVID-19 researchers in Southern Europe. *Frontiers in Communication*, *8*, 1231301.

Peters, Hans-Peter (2022). The role of organizations in the public communication of science–Early research, recent studies, and open questions. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 22(3), 551-558. *https://doi.org/10.24434/j.scoms.2022.03.3994*

Pitrelli, Nico (2021). *Il giornalismo scientifico*, Carocci, Roma.

Scamuzzi, Sergio-Bernardino; **De Bortoli, Andrea-Maurilio** (2012). *Come cambia la comunicazione della scienza. Nuovi media e terza missione dell'università* (Vol. 1, pp. 5-315). Il Mulino.

Schipani, Vanessa (2024). Journalism and public trust in science. *Synthese,* 204: 56.