Mapping social responsibility in science

Most scientists want their research to be valuable to society – they just disagree about the definition of what is valuable, new research reveals.

We are all familiar with the archetype of the starry-eyed scientist: the Gandalf-dressed, grey-haired man at the top of the ivory tower, who constantly sits with his nose buried in a book as if the book is a natural extension of his head. He reads and writes about things that the rest of us cannot possibly relate to. He simply couldn’t care less, and this tempts us to shout ‘Get off your high horse!’

This is, however, a highly distorted image, according to PhD student Cecilie Glerup. She has spent the past few years studying social responsibility together with Maja Horst, the head of the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

They found that most researchers are aware of their social responsibilities:

“The vast majority of scientists want their research to be of use to society. They just disagree on how much society should interfere with what it is they study, and how they carry out their research,” says Glerup, who is working on a PhD project on scientific sociology at the Copenhagen Business School.

Her research has shown that there are two different ideologies when it comes to research and public utility in the scientific community:

- An ideology of internal control – the researchers know how the world works, so they are in a good position to find out how it should be. Therefore, they are ideally placed to judge about the public utility of their research.
- An ideology of external control – social actors, such as politicians and organisations, know what is best for society, and this makes them ideally placed to determine what research should be done and how.

Research can be corrupted and shallow

The scientists who fall into the first group, the internal control group, believe that political and economic interests can have a negative impact on the quality of research.

They argue that research can become corrupted if the industry dictates which areas of research should be pursued and how the research should be carried out.

“It is obviously a problem if your research is funded by a pharmaceutical company if they aim for specific results. This is something that everyone agrees on. This is the scare scenario,” says Glerup.

Profit is short-sighted
The industry-sceptic scientists are not only worried about the possibility of corruption; they also find it problematic that this type of research has a predefined profit target. They believe that in order to make important discoveries, research must be motivated solely by curiosity.

"They see industrial research as being short-sighted because the main motivation is profit. This type of research, they argue, does not lead to major breakthroughs such as the discovery of the Higgs Boson."

Since the 1990s, there have been many reforms that have fundamentally changed how research is funded in Denmark. In the past, universities were given a certain sum of money by the state, and then the researchers were free to decide how they would spend their time.

The reforms have made funding allocation more competitive. This means that various – more or less politically controlled – councils allocate funding to the research projects they consider most relevant. In this way, research has become more politically controlled in recent years, much to the dismay of the researchers who feel that politicians should stay out of it.

**Political interests are fleeting**

"The scientists feel that research becomes very fashion-driven when politicians decide which areas of research should receive funding. First, climate change is everything, then suddenly nanotechnology becomes the new black and then it’s synthetic biology. This frustrates the researchers,” says Glerup.

"They feel that political interests are fleeting, whereas the world of research is a slow and steady machine. The politically driven research can therefore become shallow, and from a practical point of view it is difficult for researchers to constantly change research areas based on what politicians believe is important."

**Too much freedom leads to inefficiency**

However, not all researchers have the freedom to decide what goes on in the laboratory. Those who swear by the ideology of external control fundamentally disagree with the view that industry and political interests have a detrimental effect on research. They see it as a positive thing that society interferes with the work of researchers:

"The other group believes that research should be carried out for society, and that society therefore should have an influence on what research is being done and how. They see this as a way for scientists to ’get in sync’ with the world around them,” says Glerup.

These scientists also worry that too much independence for researchers leads to inefficiency:

"They feel that researchers are incapable of being self-propelled. They claim that researchers can easily end up spending years pondering over something that has no public utility or may not lead to any results at all.”

**Researchers fundamentally agree on their responsibilities**

In her study of scientists’ attitudes to social responsibility, Glerup has analysed 263 journal articles in which scientists discuss their relationship and responsibilities. Her main finding is that the vast majority of scientists take their social responsibility seriously – they just disagree on how to approach it.

"The researchers agree that their work should be of value to society. They just disagree on who should have the authority to define what is valuable and how this value is achieved.”
Scientific research has become more competitive and more politically controlled in recent years. This is a source of frustration for many researchers, who believe that research has become short-sighted and shallow. (Photo: <a href="http://www.shutterstock.com/" target="_blank">Shutterstock</a>)

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Cecilie Glerup

Excessive funding for popular research creates science bubble

Cecilie Glerup's profile  Maja Horst's profile


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