How does one assess the quality of journalistic science and risk reporting? There have been numerous attempts to find a common basis of assessment by applying different, intersubjectively verifiable methods, but no agreement could be reached so far (Bader 1998; Schanne 1998; Dunwoody; Peters 1992). There is no point denying that journalistic products usually do not fulfill the demand for accuracy a scientist expects his own results to meet. Just as no one would doubt the fact that journalistic constructions of “reality” do not reflect the reality of the scientific result but create their own “media” reality. There is, however, reason to doubt the argument that these deficits of journalism are worth. From the point of view of the doubters though, approaches taken by the representants of accuracy research or methods comparing the reality designs of journalists with those of scientists always reach the same conclusion: When devising its selection criteria journalism refrains from taking into account the relevancy criteria of the system it observes, be it science, economy, politics, or the judicial system. Journalism has to rely on its own criteria, otherwise it becomes a mere ward of science, and ceases to be journalism (Kohring 1997).

As a result, research approaches like the ones mentioned above, which aim at turning journalism into a transmitter of scientific interests, must seem futile. All analysis based on hierarchically comparing the reality concepts of science and journalism, eventually has to end up with the same result: that of the discrepancy between realities and hence the „contortion“ of journalistic reality.

Looking upon the issue from a systems theoretical point of view, one has to ask the question of how journalism can be criticised at all when no criteria deriving from fields other than journalism itself can be applied. The answer that will be given below is easy: Valuable criticism has to be based on the very quality criteria journalism has set up for itself. Guidebooks for journalists at work serve in our study as a source for devising these criteria. This leads to the question, when exactly one of these criteria has to be considered as fulfilled. Judgements cannot simply be based upon a reference value developed in advance, a value providing reliable information on what a well-made news report is or what it has to offer in order to be called complete. Due to the lack of such reference values, our assessments shall be based on the always disputable arguments of the critic. As a result, the information value of the criticism increases and decreases according to the quality of the critic’s arguments. This method basically resembles the approach of literary scientists.
investigating the quality of literary texts.

In the following passage I will summarise very shortly the results of our analyse of the news coverage and commentaries on the following four issues as found in 11 local German newspapers: Cloning of Dolly, the nitrofen scandal, BSE, and climate change. Analysis focuses on the science journalistic aspects of the four issues in question.

Our analysis has made partially considerable deficiencies evident. These deficiencies refer to the information depth of the coverage, the ability to comment on and to investigate into events. Regarding the extent of shortcomings, the texts differ considerably. Especially two among the three newspapers from Berlin yielded much better results in terms of quality.

The other papers usually don’t succeed in competently explaining events from a science journalistic point of view. The papers seem incapable of taking such an approach, which is particularly problematic considering the many dimensions that have to be taken into account when dealing with one of the complicated issues mentioned above. This limited ability of tackling the issues is probably due to the lack of science journalistic competence in editorial staffs. Local newspapers should therefore turn to strengthening science journalistic competence in order to improve their reporting. Considering the redundancies in our findings there is no point in hoping that the incapability of tackling scientific dimensions of issues is limited to the examples analysed in this paper. On the contrary, it is very likely that local newspapers as a rule have big difficulties in dealing with similar thematical dimensions.

What makes the two Berlin-based newspapers outstanding is, firstly, the more sophisticated treatment of issues. And secondly, science for both papers is no longer something to be seen separate from the political or the economical system. Science for them is not a source guaranteeing certainty but something that has to be questioned as well. When the Berliner Zeitung informs its readers on the economic background of the Dolly experiment, it uncovers the ties between economy and science, hereby showing that the quest for truth is not the only driving force of scientific progress but that profit interests also play a role. Here an interesting characteristic of science becomes visible: its partial loss of social detachment (Weingart 2001). The other two papers do not only cover up this trait of science, their coverage even widens the distance between science and other partial systems of society. Science is depicted as a kind of supernatural force, in the case of Dolly even bearing demonical features.

By explaining how limit values come into being the Tagesspiegel gives his readers a glimpse as to the limits of certainty. Introducing the methodical difficulties the paper points out the fact that the production of truths has to come up against limiting factors – a fact that is usually not mentioned at all. To most newspapers, the seal “scientific” suffices to prove a result trustworthy. Never are scientific results put under scrutiny, never do scientists have to justify their opinions, the social detachedness of science remains untouched. What has been proven “scientifically” is automatically trustworthy, seems to be the conviction of all local papers. Their approach to science is
similar to that of an amateur. The editors cultivate a distance to science, because its partial loss could be considered as characteristic of the “scientification” of society. They want to see science in the ivory tower it has left long ago.

References


