

Scientists disagree on responsible research

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Responsible research has been put firmly on the political agenda with, for instance, EU's Horizon 2020 programme in which all research projects must show how they contribute responsibly to society. New research from the University of Copenhagen reveals that the scientists themselves place great emphasis on behaving responsibly; they just disagree on what social responsibility in science entails. Responsibility is, in other words, a matter of perspective.

"We have, on the one hand, [scientists](#) who are convinced that they should be left alone in their ivory tower and that neither politicians nor the general public should interfere with their research activities. In their eyes, the key to conducting responsible science is to protect it from external interest because that will introduce harmful biases. Science should therefore be completely independent and self-regulated in order to be responsible," says communication researcher Maja Horst from the University of Copenhagen. She continues:

"But, on the other hand, there are scientists who believe that the ivory tower should have an open door so that politicians, publics and industry can take part in the development of science. Such engagement is seen as the only way to ensure that [science](#) develops in accordance with the needs and values of society, and thereby fulfils its social responsibilities."

In collaboration with PhD student Cecilie Glerup from Copenhagen Business School, Maja Horst has analysed more than 250 scientific journal articles all concerned with the role of research in society and

particularly the notion of responsibility. The results of their analyses have just been published in the *Journal of Responsible Innovation*.

"We can conclude that all the scientists are deeply concerned that their research is responsible and useful to society; they just disagree about what it means to conduct responsible research – how transparent the ivory tower should be, if you like. This is a problem because if we have different definitions of what it means to be a responsible scientist, it becomes very difficult to have a fruitful discussion about it. It also makes it very difficult to be specific about how we want scientists to act in order to be responsible."

The GMO debate has scared off scientists

According to Maja Horst, discussions about responsible research are particularly important in light of the fact that entire research areas may be at risk if they are perceived to be irresponsible or controversial.

"Scientists within [stem cell research](#), nanotechnology, or synthetic biology, which is about designing biological organisms, pay a great deal of attention to the way in which their research area is presented in the media and perceived by the public. They all saw how the GMO debate – about research into genetically modified organisms – ended in a deadlock that had serious consequences for robust [research projects](#) which simply could not attract funding. No one wanted to be associated with GMO [research](#) after the heated debates", explains Maja Horst and adds:

"With a more balanced discussion of the role and responsibilities of scientists and [society](#), we might have avoided the extremely rigid positions, for or against GMO, which dominated the debate."

More information: Read the article "Mapping social responsibility in

science" in the Journal of Responsible Innovation:

www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23747188.2014.982077#.U0O0mFcuGM

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