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## Books Forum Introduction

### Public knowledge and the life sciences

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Our biosocieties are not Egghead Republics (Schmidt, 1979), but are constituted through the dissemination of knowledge beyond the walls of laboratories, clinics and lecture halls. This issue's Books Forum, dedicated to the circulation of bioscientific information across experts and publics, continues our experimentation with different formats. We have expanded the scope of reviewed media from books to include periodicals and websites. In this issue, we offer views of two new edited volumes on science communication and have also invited scholars from different disciplines to look at popular science magazines on mind and brain as well as an online archive of natural history films.

In the eyes of the American philosopher-sociologist Steve Fuller, the proliferation of practically oriented handbooks and anthologies on science communication is a response to what is perceived as a growing skepticism towards science based on deficits in public knowledge of science. In his review of *Investigating Science Communication in the Information Age* by Richard Holliman and colleagues and *Communicating Science in Social Contexts* by Donghong Cheng and colleagues, Fuller argues that the deficit model presumed by both books ignores the fact that media representations of science are not simply deficient, but regardless, stimulate and guide scientific knowledge production.

This claim is illustrated by the presentation and analysis of two popular neuroscience and psychology magazines, the German *Gehirn&Geist* and *Scientific American Mind*. Frankfurt sociologist Torsten

Heinemann and neuroscientist Linda Heinemann point out that these publications do not only serve to communicate expert knowledge to a lay public, but also play a significant pedagogic role within an increasingly specialized academic knowledge economy. At the same time, however, these periodicals contribute to the genre of self-help literature. Heinemann and Heinemann criticize this translation of neuroscience into common knowledge for addressing problems of living because it lacks consideration of their social contexts. Ironically, then, this endeavor to make 'science' accessible to 'society' appears to render society invisible while making new science paramount, however inadvertently.

Finally, the French historian of science Jean-Baptiste Gouyon browsed the website ARKive.org for us. At the intersection of science communication and activism, the electronic natural history film database educates the public about biodiversity and advocates conservation. But upon closer inspection, Gouyon argues, this virtual Noah's ark turns out to be less about the protection of endangered species than about the preservation of endangered artifacts of growing epistemic value. The archiving of audiovisual records of diverse life-forms anticipates their extinction. Thus natural history film-making does not simply serve to popularize zoological and botanical findings, but generates knowledge for future generations of life scientists and others who will know these extinct species only from archival photos and films.

All three reviews remind us that relationships between the life sciences and their publics are much more complex and manifold than the now-dated top-down model of popularization suggests. The pervasion of late modern societies by bioscientific knowledge requires further problematization of the opposition between knowledge and mere popular opinion as a long-established organizing principle in the history of Western knowledge.

### Reference

Schmidt, A. (1979) *The Egghead Republic*. London: Marion Boyars.

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