



Humanities

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INTERVIEW KNOWLEDGE UTILISATION IN THE HUMANITIES

Sound in the lead role: The *Sonic Science festival* of Karin Bijsterveld

Within her Vici project *Sonic Skills* (2010-2015) historian Karin Bijsterveld from Maastricht University and her colleagues investigated the role of sounds and listening in science and technology. Based on her research she organised a *Sonic Science festival* in January 2015 that included concerts, demonstrations, children's workshops and an exhibition. The exhibition can still be seen online via exhibition.sonicskills.org.

What opportunities did this research offer for knowledge utilisation?

'People usually associate science with visual evidence. But researchers listen a lot as well. Within the Vici project we itemised how sound plays a role within various disciplines. That is similar in everyday life. You can hear whether the engine of your car is running properly. And the doctor can make a diagnosis by listening to your lungs.'

How was the event organised?

'Originally we wanted to outsource most of the work to an artistic institution. But that did not work. Cultural institutions are facing difficult times. Furthermore, something like this requires so much specific knowledge that it is difficult to outsource. Your own network is also important. For example, we wanted to demonstrate how biologists used phonographs in the past to record bird sounds. I knew somebody who can do that. Then we had to arrange a phonograph, create a sound that birds would sing to on command, and ensure we had several birds that would sing in January. A bird club specially trained several birds for this.'

What was the result?

'Nearly all of the activities were fully booked. For example, we had children's workshops and concerts that could count on widespread interest. Radio stations interviewed us several times about the activities. People still regularly approach me about that: I know your research, it was on the radio wasn't it?'

How does knowledge utilisation benefit you as a scholar?

'An awful lot and in many different ways. That phonograph demonstration now serves as the opening chapter of the final book of the project. I am receiving new invitations for lectures, and visitors to the exhibition have pointed me towards new information. Finally a piece of music that was specially composed for the festival – inspired by the radio contact between NASA and one of its satellites – will probably now be arranged for a symphony orchestra. As a cultural scientist I found it fantastic to initiate such a cross-fertilisation between science and the artistic domain.'

Tips for fellow researchers?

'Do not underestimate how much time something like this costs. Budget an assistant for several days per week for an entire year. I really did need my assistant Marith Dieker to arrange an endless number of practical matters. For several months I spent each weekend on eBay sorting out the attributes. And think in advance which researchers are available until when. Because if a postdoc moves on you will possibly lose all of his or her contacts as well.'

