Chapter 5
Medialization of Science as a Prerequisite of Its Legitimization and Political Relevance¹

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Abstract  Sociologists have diagnosed an increasing ‘medialization’ of science—that is, an orientation towards the mass media, with the consequence that media criteria become relevant within science. The medialization of science is seen in this chapter as a consequence of the medialization of politics. Based on empirical surveys of German researchers, public information officers of science organizations and decision-makers in the political-administrative system, as well as a hermeneutical analysis of German press coverage, the authors analyse the manifestations and political impacts of medialization in the public communication of scientists and science organizations. Two biomedical fields—stem cell research and epidemiology—are used as case studies. Results of the empirical analyses support the hypothesis that the medialization of

¹The following primary researchers participated in the international survey of biomedical scientists, the results of which we refer to in this chapter: Sharon Dunwoody and Dominique Brossard (United States), Steve Miller (United Kingdom), Suzanne de Cheveigné (France) and Shoji Tsuchida (Japan).

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science, in so far as it guides the public communication strategies of scientific actors, increases the chances of scientific actors being noticed and taken seriously by the political-administrative system. Effects are seen in a contribution to the legitimization of science by reinforcing the perception of its social relevance and in improving the chances of scientific expertise becoming effective in policy-making.

**Keywords** Legitimization, media constructs of science, media contacts of scientists, medialization, political impact of science coverage, public relations of science

### 5.1 Introduction

The medialization of politics is regarded as one of the central changes in the political process in the modern ‘media society’ (Schulz 2006, Vowe 2006). A number of related developments can be understood in this context: the prevalence of media-constructed reality, the key importance of media in conveying political ideas to voters, and the orientation of political communication actors to the ‘logic’ of the media (Sarcinelli 1998). To begin with, medialization has consequences for the manner in which politics are presented. The political output is addressed primarily to the mass media and the central criterion for success is a positive response in media coverage. The question, however, is whether the changes brought about by medialization are limited exclusively to the way politics are depicted, or whether they also affect content. From the outset of the discussion concerning the consequences of the growing media orientation of political actors and voters, fears have been voiced that we could be moving towards a world of media-induced appearances and the dominance of symbolic politics. In short, this would be a situation in which medialization affects the substance of politics, decreasing the quality of political work (Sarcinelli 1989, Kepplinger 2002).

Imhof (2006: 201 ff) has identified, as a consequence of medialization, an increasing concentration of power in actors that use public relations (PR) strategies to affect the political arena. He links the success of media-response oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to their early adaptation to the conditions of the media society. Meanwhile, however, established actors have compensated for the initial advantage gained by NGOs in terms of media response ‘by adapting a successful newsworthiness-oriented manner to the media’s logic in the selection, interpretation and “staging” of events’.

Weingart (2001) looks at medialization with respect to science. He sees, as a consequence of this phenomenon, an increase in the orientation of science to the media, which is due to the increasingly close connection of science to its social context. According to Weingart, in concrete terms, this is done in order to increase the legitimacy of science and influence political decisions (e.g. to support large-scale research), as well as to rally public support for claims in intrascientific disputes (e.g. disagreements about priorities).