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GENTLE-MINDED SOCIOPATHS JOIN PEOPLE

The necessity of maintaining openness within academia, scientific passions, and the vision of the university closely connected with the city is discussed by **Prof. Ryszard Koziołek**, Rector of the University of Silesia in Katowice and General Director of the Silesian Festival of Science Katowice.



Prof. Ryszard Koziółek

Professor of humanities, philologist, and literary scholar; currently serving his second term as Rector of the University of Silesia in Katowice. He is the substantive leader of the European City of Science Katowice 2024 and Vice-President of the Conference of Rectors of Polish Universities. He has received awards for essay writing, including Gdynia Literary Award (2010) for the book *Ciała Sienkiewicza. Studia o płci i przemocy [Sienkiewicz's Bodies: Studies on Gender and Violence]*.
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After visiting the Silesian Science Festival Katowice, I was stunned: it is such a colorful, sizeable, and intense event. Why did you decide on this formula?

RYSZARD KOZIÓLEK: It is difficult to say that it was a decision. This is a process that has not yet been completed, although we are done with the most important stage. At the beginning, our goal was to create something modest that would show what academia is busy with. I believe that taxpayers should perceive a sense of purpose in spending public funds. Society simply deserves it, and we are obliged to present science in a convincing way.

Another goal was to show people that they are real beneficiaries of science, not just observers of hermetic activities pursued by researchers. A bridge between the world of academia and the rest of society is necessary because a kind of crypto-narcissism is inscribed in the profession of the scientist. We keep honing concepts and methods so vigorously, and we desire precision so strongly that we inevitably become gentle-minded sociopaths – we are less and less understood even by researchers from other disciplines, let alone people outside academia. And if we become incomprehensible, it is very easy to ask the question: why are we here at all? In situations where the sovereignty of universities is threatened – which we are currently witnessing in the United States – if there is no understanding of what we do, we lose the most important ally we work for, namely society. Academia must not be allowed to mind its own business in isolation.

That was our motivation. In subsequent editions, we saw that the festival began to enjoy a level of popularity that surprised us. Of course, at the beginning, we could not have been sure of that.

Now, with your permission, I would like to voice a certain objection – namely, that your festival verges on being a carnival. Learning is not nearly as colorful and fun every day.

We are aware of such objections. Of course, science is not like that. I am a humanist and philologist, with 90% of my work involving desk-bound stints in the library. Now imagine that I am being presented in this form at the festival.

This sounds very much like an idea for an art installation.

Andy Warhol made a film entitled *Sleep*; a man simply sleeps for eight hours. It would be similar in terms of dynamics and plot twists.

Some may say that the humanities are a poor example. But even with laboratory sampling, genome sequencing, or conducting physical experiments – all of this is repeated hundreds of times and often fails. This would not look good at the festival either.

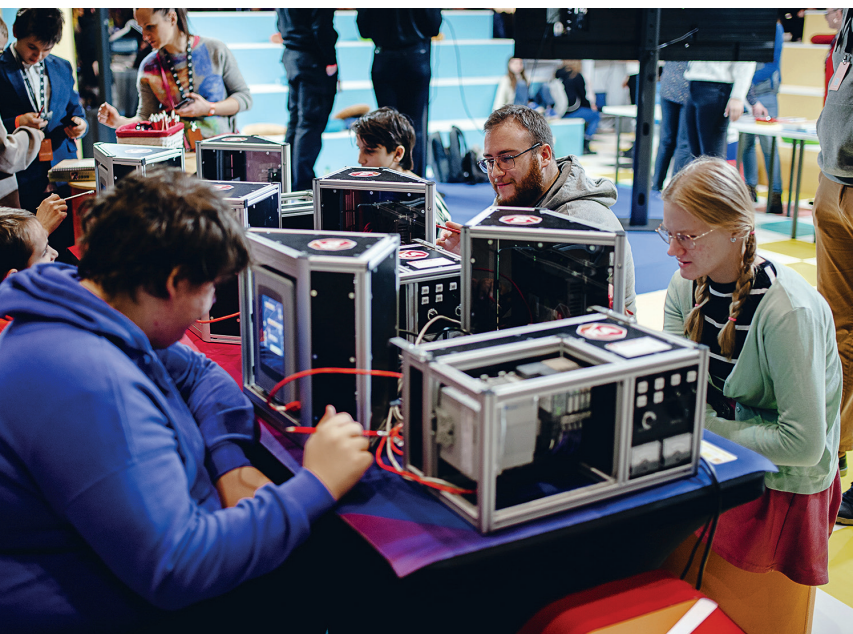
However, I would ask a different question: is the truth about the everyday activities of a scientist really science? By no means. Science is something that occurs between the mind of a scientist and the problem which they have been grappling with, sometimes for years. There are hellish or heavenly things going on there: doubts, ecstasy, delight, weariness, envy, anger that a colleague has done something better, or that no one appreciates what I do. These affects in science are fascinating.

The program for each edition is the result of grappling with the issue you are raising. That's why, for example, every year there are events which are consistently maintained at a fairly high level of specialization, demanding for participants from a particular sector or laypeople with advanced knowledge. We don't want to give up on the playful aspect, because we truly want children to fall in love with science. So be it. We accept the risk that there may be too much scientific hocus-pocus, because the goal is to spark off curiosity in the youngest participants.

We are seeking different vocabularies and different ways of being understood and of arousing interest. The festival is also a great three-day school of scientific communication, where many of us have appeared before a broader audience for the first time, rather than before students.

Meaning people who can get up and leave at any time. However, this is a different situation than in the lecture hall.

Of course, it is. They will leave their seats because it is boring, but conversely, there are people in the audience who can be fanatics about a particular topic and know more than the performer. Overall, however, the experience for scholars at the festival is extremely uplifting. The curiosity and enthusiasm of



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the audience cannot be overestimated. It is a momentary escape from alienation, when it seems that the problem I am working on might interest five people on a good day.

Just like in that old joke: “I bought your book,” “Oh, that’s you!” The attendees are hand-picked, right?

Yes, it’s good.

How do you hold such a large event? It is clear that this requires considerable outlays and people’s energy too.

One of the few reasons why I enjoy heading a university is that if you want to do something serious, you can’t just order people to get it done. You need to convince them and make them become allies in such an undertaking.

So not by way of an official order?

It doesn’t work at all.

You are the rector; you pull the strings.

But you were at the festival. Such involvement cannot be achieved by issuing orders to people. Over 200 people from the university are involved in organizing the festival. They do it because they have fallen in love with the event.

In this sense, the festival as an idea has passed the test. The idea must be implemented by a large group of people who are committed to it. Of course, they are committed professionally as university employees, but that alone is not enough.

Where does the money come from?

Funding comes from the ministry, the provincial self-government, the city of Katowice, which hosts the festival, the Upper Silesian-Zagłębie Metropolis, and all the companies we have managed to persuade to support us. The festival has been financed in this way since the beginning.

All universities contribute organizationally and in terms of personnel and, where necessary and within their means, allocate funds for the popularization and promotion of science – something that has also required internal negotiations. Some of my colleagues – and they had every right to do so – questioned the scale of the project.

The turning point came when one of the voivodeship marshals paid us a visit with his daughters, who, incidentally, completely disappeared for two days, immersed in the festival, and noticed that his voters were among the stands and performances. After that meeting, I observed a change: a certain goodwill emerged, and purse strings were loosened quite a bit. This is one of the greatest benefits – we have increased our weight in the eyes of important figures in political,



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public, and local government life. We are no longer seen as a community of eggheads dealing with incomprehensible matters and regarded as impractical simply because ChatGPT was not invented by us. Suddenly, we became people who had something interesting to say.

The science popularization community reacted strongly and negatively to the ŚFN (Silesian Science Festival) inviting controversial figures such as the Rodzeń brothers – doctors and YouTubers (who have been accused of spreading information inconsistent with the current state of knowledge). How do you decide who should receive an invitation and who should not?

Since then, we have established a festival Guest Council, as we did not want to make these decisions alone. It consists of researchers from the Academic Consortium – Katowice City of Science – representing almost all scientific disciplines. They review the guests and speakers we propose, assessing their reliability and academic standing. Given the scale of participation – the number reaches three thousand speakers and exhibitors each year – there is no way that we can verify everyone in terms of content, and of course we have experienced a few mishaps.

But we also deliberately engaged in controversial discussions. In the midst of the pandemic – the festival was held outdoors at the time – we organized a debate between epidemiologists and anti-vaccination activists. I supported this, although I was in the minority among the organizers. We were terribly afraid of the outcome; we strengthened security, but the discussion turned out fine. I don’t think the anti-vaxxers were

convinced, but the situation itself – the atmosphere at the university – seemed to moderate the language and forced a more factual conversation.

I believe that an extremely important role of the university is to internalize conflicts of worldview, as long as they remain deliberative in nature or are only expressed verbally. This is my point of view. It is not often shared, because it is risky.

Another example, which was equally – if not more – high-profile, is that of Łukasz Sakowski from two editions ago. My colleagues specializing in transition issues and evolutionary psychology did not want to talk to him. For me, this was an example of exclusion we commit in the name of maintaining methodological and conceptual purity – separating opinion from fact, and so on. I diagnose this as a crisis in academic debate. At least some of us who are ready for such a conversation should engage in it. There is no institution other than a university that can defuse such topics and turn ideological conflicts into verbal disputes. Because what is the alternative? “I’ll only talk to people like me, so not to you,” right? In its extreme form, this path can lead to civil war.

You know that factual conversation is one thing, but pseudo-medical content is often outright misinformation. It’s easy to tell a lie, but proving nonsense in a factual manner requires a lot of work. This type of live discussion is a huge risk.

Would you agree to a Polish version of the debate between Dawkins and the Archbishop of Canterbury? In such a discussion we would have debaters who are known to hold completely different worldviews.

A worldview is one thing, and pushing false statements is another. We are entitled to different opinions, but not to different facts.

Let us imagine the discussion between Archbishop Jędraszewski and Jan Hartman.

What a selection! Oh dear.

Would you like to listen?

Not really, to be honest.

And I would. Because being so far apart, both would be inclined to keep throwing insults. What if we could get them to talk to each other? I think that the benefits of such a conversation would be far greater than listening to the unwise sermons of one and the sharp, often offensive editorials of the other.

I’d insist that you are giving examples of worldview differences, whereas in the case of the anti-vaccination movement, we are dealing with the denial of reality.

It seems to me that anti-vaxxers distort the facts for ideological reasons, because of conspiracy theories, or due to their overall beliefs about the scientific world. If we say that people are influenced by influencers, then I believe there should be a place where influencers can meet scientists, and the public can see the difference between them.

A group of people will always shrug their shoulders and say, “What is it those scientists know?”

We are no masters of souls and minds. All we can do is provide the best knowledge we have, based on research we have conducted ourselves or that we know others have done. The role of the festival is to present this knowledge in an understandable form.

Or maybe that’s why this year’s 9th ŚFN will take place under the slogan “Experiment!” Verify, interpret, draw your own conclusions?

On the one hand, this year’s slogan is driven by concerns about the status of natural and exact sciences, especially in primary school. Today, there is a lack of thorough reflection on what school knowledge should be, particularly in a world where AI is at our fingertips. At the festival, we will put forward the thesis that these sciences should be present in primary school mainly through experiments – knowledge in action, curiosity in action, testing and practical application. Since knowledge is kinetic, thinking is motoric, and connected with the structure of our bodies, it will always differ from machine thinking.

In addition, the slogan is intended to motivate people to question the sovereign realm of human knowledge in the face of the stunning effectiveness of machine thinking.



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Katowice was the European City of Science in 2024. Are there any traces of this initiative visible in the city today?

When planning activities as part of the European City of Science, we asked ourselves what exactly a “city of science” means. We gave ourselves a very straightforward answer: we would like to create a model of an urban-academic community in which residents benefit daily from having academic institutions in their area. This means that in their daily individual and collective decisions, they benefit from the permanent support of science.

Like, for example, what?

For example, ask experts whether to replace your coal furnace with a gas furnace or a heat pump. What are the sensible choices that science recommends today? What do the economic forecasts say? There are plenty of such topics: what to eat, what not to eat, how to support your child in their education, and so on.

And how would it become real?

The need for real space gave rise to the concept of the Green Science Zone, an urban and academic project covering part of the campus and the city, where the boundaries between the university and the urban fabric are blurred in a way that is unique compared to Warsaw, Kraków, or other separate campuses. Our goal is to create an urban district that would be an attractive meeting place, naturally integrating residents and scholars, embedded in the scientific and artistic program, and conducive to free conversation and spending time together. This space would be a venue for regular events, open seminars, and year-round science festival modules, bringing communities together around important regional and global issues. The most important thing, however, is that it is a place where young people genuinely want to be. Currently, we have a master plan ready, and we are preparing to raise funds for project guidelines and a Europe-wide competition to create a unique science district unlike any other in the world.

I hope this is not a utopian vision.

It is utopian because it goes beyond the horizon of what I know. But it is real.

The opening ceremony of the seventh festival and the European City of Science Katowice initiative was impressive. Katowice Spodek arena, a concert by stars, cabaret – I can't recall a similar event honoring science held anywhere in Poland. But I sat there and thought, “Isn't this just wishful thinking? Here, there are lights, colors, crowds, and over there, every day, you see institute directors wandering around the building, turning down the radiators to save on



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heating costs.” Expenditure on education has stalled.

I rarely struggle to come up with something to say, and right now I just don't know... Maybe this way: what is the alternative? Pulling a long face? This does not deny reality, but it is rather used to build a stronger argument defending against disregard. Just like in that episode with the voivodeship marshal. Such an event says, “Look at us, give us some admiration.”

The arguments presented so far have not led to a perception that science is important or that it is the driving force behind the economy. They remain in the layer of declarations made by politicians. And when it comes to financing, those in power will say, “We have to build up our armament.” Fair enough, but why is the potential of Polish science not being used at the same time? Are we going to shop for everything abroad? Why are there no competitions for technological solutions in the area of weapon development? There are many possibilities: new-generation wound-dressing materials, quick response to PTSD still on the battlefield... There are so many problems that could be handled by Polish science with the support of the state.

You are clearly angry about this situation.

It's all beyond my grasp.

Finally, had you not become a philologist, what kind of scientist would you be?

A hydrologist of mountain rivers.

What a precise answer!

That's true. Here, I'm positive. Ever since childhood, I've had an atavistic urge to immediately jump into mountain streams and rivers.

INTERVIEW BY KAROLINA GŁOWACKA