

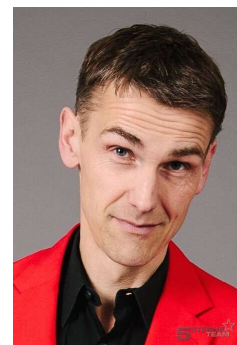
## On Air and on Stage: Is it Art to Communicate Science? Interview with Dr. Sascha Ott, Science Journalist, Physicist, Presenter, Actor

Physicist or Comedian? Action or science? Science journalist Dr. Sascha Ott<sup>1</sup> provides during his talks and shows impressive evidence that knowledge and humor do not necessarily have to be contrasts.

Dr. Ott started studying physics in 1991, but soon figured out that journalism appeared to be more attractive to him. Eventually, he became a profound science journalist and started to perform his own science talks and shows.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>web: <http://www.saschaott.de/>

<sup>2</sup>photo: <https://www.5-sterne-redner.de/referenten/dr-sascha-ott/>



**JUnQ:** Dear Dr. Ott, you first studied physics but very soon realized that this was not your passion. Yet, you still completed your diploma and after your PhD in science journalism, you established your career with science shows on radio and on stage. When did you have the idea to combine science with an entertainment show?

**Dr. Ott:** I always liked to act but since I started to study physics, I wanted to finish it even though I knew I wasn't born for it. It took until my pre-diploma in physics to see an alternative and not much later, I had the idea of combining science with theatre in such an intense way. Journalism then helped me to combine natural sciences with language.

**JUnQ:** One surely needs a lot of talent!

**Dr. Ott:** There is a very important differentiation I should make: I don't see myself as an artist. I see myself as a craftsman. Together with the Physikanten, I'm working with real actors and I'm learning a lot from them by simply watching, training and copying. But sometimes, it can be sufficient to take an established method and alter it just a little bit to create something new and appealing. And this demands a lot of creativity.

**JUnQ:** Has there been a point at which you were wondering if your work is profitable enough?

**Dr. Ott:** I never had the existential fear that the overall concept will not work. Certainly, you have to calculate how much effort you must put into the shows and the development of the experiments in relation to the income. Therefore, it is simply not possible to do only perfectly tailored experiments for every single show. But you can improvise and adapt existing content, which is usually perfectly fine to give the audience something to hook on to. In fact, I'm always positively surprised after doing my ac-

count settlements at the end of the year.

**JUnQ:** Do you see a need in communicating science via a show? Could this be a way to make natural sciences more popular especially for pupils?

**Dr. Ott:** In the last 10 to 15 years, the amount of popular scientific shows was continually increasing. Earlier, TV shows were rather didactic and almost entirely technical. Now, more people and even more primary-school pupils are interested in science. Considering most teachers are not trained to teach knowledge that way, I see a strong need and trend in communicating natural science in an entertaining manner and being authentic at the same time.

But, an amusing show on stage is of course not a replacement for teaching the theoretical and mathematical basis. The question is, what amount of knowledge is necessary in the present society. In our technological world, it is more and more common to be able to just handle machines by specifically designed interfaces. The need for the knowledge of the physical and mathematical context fades into the background evermore and many are not motivated or interested to learn about it.

The affection to a subject, although, is motivated by character. This applies to natural sciences as well as to humanities.

**JUnQ:** You were working as an author for a radio station. The lack of visualization reduces the reports only to acoustic descriptions of processes. This requires a lot of imagination from the audience. How difficult is it to mediate scientific content vividly via radio?

**Dr. Ott:** Of course, it is hard to emphasize the attraction of radio to a passionate TV viewer. But, I am convinced that nearly everything can be done acoustically. It is even easier to focus on a short narration than giving colour to it in an elaborately produced film. On TV, you are always in distress to find the right pictures. They only underline

the spoken words but do not display them precisely. It works well on technical processes like “how does a dustcart work”. But, real modern science is not visual, it’s microscopic.

**JUnQ:** How is the feedback to your shows? Do you have a lot of competition?

**Dr. Ott:** The *Physikanten* are performing shows in South Africa, Kazakhstan, Abu Dhabi, Dublin and Tokyo – that

indicates a worldwide interest. There is no other company like the *Physikanten* that offers this kind of science show. This is clearly a unique feature in the physics sector. But, I think the potential is not yet fully explored. Other good shows can still find excited audience.

**JUnQ:** Thank you very much for this interview!

— Tatjana Dänzer and Kai Litzius