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Editorial

Evolution of communication – knowledge transfer in Darwin’s times

Among German biologists, it is a commonplace notion that Charles Darwin’s ideas on evolution (as well as those of Lamarck) were first adopted and propagated by Ernst Haeckel in the 1860ies and that before this time little attention was paid to theories explaining the origin of the multiplicity of life by mechanisms other than creation. Not well remembered is the fact that the ideas of Erasmus Darwin, Charles’ grandfather, were also known at that time and lively debated, e.g. in “Die Nachtwachen des Bonaventura”, an ironical novel generally assigned to the “black romanticism” era. Remarkably, this novel appeared as early as 1804, and grandfather Darwin’s work “The temple of Nature” is cited herein, a poetical formulation of his ideas which was published in England in 1803, i.e. only one year before the “Nachtwachen” came out.

Hence, the dissemination of knowledge between England and Germany already in the early 19th century, i.e. amidst the Napoleonic Wars, was not as slow or handicapped as one might think. Erasmus Darwin’s work was even published in German in 1808, at the acme of Napoleon’s continental system against Britain, and the sea blockade by the Royal Navy.



Was this quick recension of Darwin's theories in Germany a one way road? Definitely not! The main oeuvre of J. B. Spix, founder of the Bavarian State Collection of Zoology in Munich, and his colleague C. F. Ph. v. Martius, a voluminous report of their 1817-1820 expedition to Brazil, was published in Germany in 1823. And when did this work emerge among British naturalists? As early as in march 1824, again only one year later and – most astonishing – even in an edition in English language.

Most authors will agree that the peer reviewing and publishing systems for scientific papers established since the times of the two Darwins were in many cases not faster. However, in the last years, a revolution of information exchange has taken place by virtue of the world wide web, e. g. internet accessible biodiversity databases such as GBIF, or open access journals that distribute the papers as pdf files. This breakthrough towards a faster communication produces, however, problems for many publishing houses as well as a risk of the distribution low-quality information. In addition, a two-class-system of scientific papers might develop, with freely accessible papers having higher citation indices than printed papers or papers with only limited access.

In awareness of this complex situation, Spixiana, our house journal named after the founder of the ZSM, started to make pdf files of the published papers freely available for scientific purposes, but also continues its efforts to produce printed papers as in Darwin's times with high quality illustrations. In addition we are pleased to announce that Spixiana is since some months an indexed ISI journal. We thank our authors for their collaboration and their good papers.

Not only the scientific results of Darwin's times, but also the surprisingly fast knowledge transfer are great examples for what human curiosity can achieve. 200 years after Charles Darwin's birth, and 150 years after the publication of "The Origin of Species", the Bavarian State Collection of Zoology contributed to communication about evolution by awarding the 10th R. J. H. Hintelmann Scientific Award in a mini symposium named "Darwin's great-grandchildren – new answers to old questions", and the editors dedicate this issue to those who had new answers **and** new questions.

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