

Press release

Dübendorf, 28 February 2006

Michael Hagmann – new Head of Communications at Empa

From Heilbronn via California to Dübendorf

«No one can be angry at me for asking many questions», says Empa's newly-appointed Head of Communications with a smile, «because I have a professional 'license to ask'. And I like using it».

The 39-year old, a Swabian by birth, took over Empa's Communications Section on 1 December last year. After all the years spent behind the editor's desk, he is happy that he now gets closer to research again. As science editor of the *SonntagsZeitung*, with *Science* and working as a freelancer, he spent seven years researching and reporting on themes related to life sciences, «but that included everything, from cloning and medical topics to paleontology, anthropology and behavioral science». His «beat» also covered environmental themes such as ecology and climate.

First «calling»: biochemist

His studies took him away from his home town of Heilbronn in 1987, firstly to the University of Bayreuth, then, after first diploma in biochemistry, to the ETH in Zurich. There, he gained a master's in the Laboratory for Experimental Immunology under Rolf Zinkernagel, at that point yet to be awarded his Nobel Prize. At the Institute for Molecular Biology of the University of Zurich, he worked from 1992 – 1997 on his dissertation under the guidance of Walter Schaffner on the subject of problems in gene regulation and genetic recombination of, among other things, the herpes-simplex virus.

The desire to become a science journalist

After having written numerous scientific papers on molecular biology, he decided that «Everything to do with writing for scientific publications seems easy to me, even in English». Science as a subject matter was for him, as it had always been, one of the most fascinating areas there is. That is why Hagmann crossed the Atlantic after a short postdoc research phase. He was accepted for the 'Postgraduate Program in Science Communication' at the University of California in Santa Cruz (UCSC) – the only member of the group without English as his mother tongue. There, he learnt the craft of writing professionally from scratch; he wrote for the local press about crazy demonstrators on Veteran's Day, about fertilizer for lettuce and strawberries in the Salinas Valley, and produced

contributions for a local radio station on the questionable felling of the mighty redwoods. Thus equipped, he took on a short-term contract in 1998 with *Discover* in New York and joined *Science* in Washington, after graduating from UCSC, to become a certified science journalist. He then advanced, on the return to Europe, to the position of European science correspondent for *Science* in Cambridge.

Same career, different tools

Fate appeared to want Hagmann to return to Switzerland. In 2000, the *SonntagsZeitung* offered him the job of science journalist on the editing team. For five years he worked there, but spent also time working as a freelance consultant, either in terms of communication affairs in EU research programs or for the creation of a new degree program in science communication in Germany.

Hagmann views the step from science editor to head of communications at Empa as a welcome change of scenery with the potential for a steep learning curve. When asked what he expects of his work, he thinks «The political dimension of research is what attracts me most to public work for a research institute». He is, however, intrigued as to how communication can be used by Empa in its capacity as a creator of identity. He is not least happy about supporting other researchers by making their results known to a wider public. Fame, honor and research money will only be available if successful results come into the public domain. Because, as he says, laughing, «There's nothing in it for me if no one becomes any the wiser».

For further information:

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