

19.12.2024

## Column by Visiting Professor Jakob Ohme: Bridges to Zurich



*Bridges* are important in academia. They allow us to exchange and collaborate across borders. Guest professorships can also be understood as *bridges*, and in my case, a *bridge* from Berlin to Zurich was built, although the connection with Deutsche Bahn is not as straight as it appears in this image.

On my birthday last year, I received an email from Frank asking me if I'd be interested in joining IKMZ as a guest professor. And following the theme of a popular German song, 'Über sieben *Brücken* musst du gehen,' it did not take me that long to decide that I would follow this invitation.

Starting over in a country that is still foreign can feel a lot like jumping from a *bridge* into the cold waters of the Limmat. However, my start in Zurich was extremely uncomplicated, mainly due to the organizational help of Bettina, Hülya, Olga, Stefanie, and others. It was made very easy for me to arrive at IKMZ. And at the latest when I plunged into the Limmat myself for the first time during the hot weeks of August, I quickly felt like a fish in water in Zurich.

While others need to first build *bridges* where there are none, I was lucky to know already quite some people at IKMZ, which is why my start here felt less shaky than what the slackliner there probably feels. Nadine, I knew from Amsterdam, whom I had just met a few weeks before in Berlin; Thomas and Nico, I knew from the data donation community; and many of you I knew from conferences or other gatherings. It is moments like these where you realize how important these *bridges* are, that we build throughout our academic lives. And these *bridges* helped me feel welcome at IKMZ immediately.

The head of the department in Denmark, where I started my academic teaching career, once told me that teaching is building *bridges* between the reasons why students picked a certain subject and the content that we want them to learn and understand. I always liked that picture, although back then, it was pretty hard to build a *bridge* between the wishes of young students who wanted to be sports journalists and teaching journalism history and ethics.

In UZH, I had the pleasure of teaching courses on topics I really cared about. I developed a new lecture on Political Information and Digital Platforms, trying to *bridge* the student's interest in social media and the need to understand the bigger role that these platforms have in our political information environment. But it also taught me that definitive answers in this field are rare. With the US election and the social media ban in Australia, there were enough current developments to discuss the pros and cons of platforms in a political environment – and other than what people told me, the students were eager to discuss and share their experiences.

In my seminar on Political Participation in Digital Democracies, it was the students who needed to build *bridges* from the course material to the development of their own participation campaigns. My favorite campaign here was Next Stop, Olten!, which wanted to increase the attractiveness of the train station in Olten, which many people use every day, and where the goal was not only to call for the city to fix things but for citizens and commuters to land a hand and plant flowers or paint a bench while they are waiting. *Bridging* theoretical concepts and enacting them in practical work was the goal of this course.

I found IKMZ very well-connected to other institutions and countries, with *bridges* being built in many directions. The international speaker series is only one example here, but the many connections with international colleagues but also with other departments like politics and computer linguistic clearly showed me that – despite popular belief – Switzerland is not an island, and neither is IKMZ.

Another type of *bridge* was my fellowship at the Collegium Helveticum. I was honored to be part of this interdisciplinary community where scholars from all parts of the world, the academic discipline map, and career levels come together. What I particularly liked here were the Thursday lunch talks, where a group proposed a topic, like academic kinship or visuals in climate communication, and we would indeed have a truly interdisciplinary exchange, with viewpoints from artists, biochemists, ethnographers, or computer scientists. These discussions – more than the presentation of each other's work – helped me to build mental *bridges* to different ways of understanding the same questions.



What I very much enjoyed when working at IKMZ was the bundled wisdom of communication science. Coming from Weizenbaum Institute, which is, per definition, an interdisciplinary place, the disciplinary perspective helped me to get good input on some of my own projects, for example, in the research seminars but also in talks with many colleagues. The foundation of knowledge at IKMZ is as strong as the foundation of this famous James Bond jump *bridge* Diga Verzasca in Tessin (and no, I did not jump).

This picture of the Münsterbrücke was taken on the morning of November 6th. The night before, I had the pleasure of having dinner with you at the Blaue Ente, and of course, we were talking about the US elections, and I was guessing Kamala Harris would win this. The morning after, we knew better, and the weather on that day reflected my mood pretty well when I walked to the Ringier Haus to give an interview while listening to Donald Trump's victory speech. The day should also end with the German coalition breaking up, making this one of the more infamous days of my time in Zurich.



On a bright note, during the interview, I met a colleague from UZH Political Science, Karsten Donnay, and invited him to the workshop on Visual Aspects of Political Communication that I hosted at the Collegium. So a new *bridge* was built, even on this grey day.

While it's not a strict prerequisite for a guest visit at IKMZ, it felt natural to develop *bridges* with colleagues here, given the topical overlap that my work had with many of your interests and projects. Besides many interesting discussions about platform regulation, science communication, the Swiss media landscape, and political system, and media change and innovation, I will leave Zurich with some new projects. Together with Anne, Sophia, Maud, Hannah, and Franzi we will study the relationship between news avoidance and referendum turnout, partly funded by the DSI. Together with Thomas, Nico, and Lion, we will collaborate with German media houses that are interested in the political activities of users' TikTok feeds around the Bundestagswahl next February.

A special experience was my 'farewell present' from IKMZ, which took us behind the scenes of the Zurich Soap Brand Soeder, where we got to know quite a lot about the soapmaking and marketing process and where we once learned that communication is everything, also in the soap business. This was a different kind of *bridge* into a new field for me, and I would very much like to thank IKMZ and especially Mike for organizing this, it was a fun tour.



Overall, I'm looking back at a wonderful time here at IKMZ and in Zurich. It was inspiring, pleasant, and at times also exhausting, but I never regretted coming here and will – as it often is – leave with a crying and a laughing eye. As the Langenwies Viadukt in Graubünden proves, *bridges* can span quite some distance and I am convinced that the Zurich – Berlin *bridge* stands on a stronger fundament after my visit here at IKMZ. This also means that if you are ever in

Berlin, please let me know and stop by at Weizenbaum Institute.

And I will also use this for a commercial for the next Weizenbaum Conference that I am co-organizing next June in Berlin. The call is coming out soon, and the deadline is the end of February.

Thank you very, very much, and merci vielmals to all of you at IKMZ, who helped me when I was lost standing at the *bridge* between the two sides of the departments, to those of you who asked me to join them for lunch and stopped by for a round of mini-table tennis. From now on, the table will be back at Mike's office, who will be a much more competitive opponent than I am, so good luck!

Culturally, Zurich of course has a lot to offer but what resonated most with me was the Zurich Hip Hop (that I discovered with Anne at the Ole Ole Bar) and especially one song from SKOR, called Willkommen in Züri! Ich hab mich während der ganzen Zeit hier sehr Willkommen in Züri gefühlt, habt vielen Dank für die wunderschöne Zeit!