

## THE IAU WORKING GROUP ON COMMUNICATING ASTRONOMY WITH THE PUBLIC

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### ABSTRACT

The IAU Working Group originated as one of the outcomes of the ‘Communicating Astronomy with the Public’ meeting held in Washington D.C. in 2003. Its remit makes it an IAU-wide group, placing it in Division XII and distinct from Education (Commission 46). Since its inception a webpage has been developed, the Washington Charter adopted by a number of societies and agencies and this conference organised. In spite of this early success, there is still a great deal more work to be done and volunteers are actively encouraged to sign up.

### INCEPTION

‘The Communicating Astronomy with the Public’ meeting held in October 2003 in Washington D.C. was the second international event; the first being held in Tenerife some eighteen months earlier. The Washington meeting was organised as a series of linked workshops and had specific outcomes (or charges) in mind. Two key items emerged from the meeting: the formulation of the ‘Washington Charter’ and the setting up of an IAU Working Group to promote astronomy outreach in the global sense. Dennis Crabtree and Ian Robson were proposed as Co-Chairs for the group with Lars Lindberg Christensen as the convener and Executive Secretary.

The group set themselves four early targets: promulgation to and adoption of the Washington Charter by societies, agencies etc; organisation of a webpage to promote the activities; organisation of some form of repository for data and organisation of a third conference in 2005. The Washington Charter will be discussed later by Dennis and Lars will discuss progress on what has now become the Virtual Repository scheme.

### AN IAU WORKING GROUP OF DIVISION XII

From the outset it was considered important that this Working Group had the widest possible remit for astronomy outreach (and I use this term in the broadest sense) and that it should be distinct from the Education section of the IAU (Commission 46). With the blessing of the IAU, the newly formed group set out a range of activities and commenced work on a webpage hosted by ESO.

Paramount in the work of each activity is the belief that it is the responsibility of every practising astronomer to play some role in explaining the interest and value of science to our real employers, the taxpayers of the world.

Out of this came the Mission statement:

- To encourage and enable a much larger fraction of the astronomical community to take an active role in explaining what we do (and why) to our fellow citizens.
- To act as an international, impartial coordinating entity that furthers the recognition of outreach and public communication on all levels in astronomy.
- To encourage international collaborations on outreach and public communication.
- To endorse standards, best practices and requirements for public communication.

It is widely recognised that there are a number of barriers to communicating astronomy. Right up front is the fact that a number of professional astronomers do not feel comfortable with the very concept of talking with the public, either because they don't know how to communicate with the general public very well and/or suspect that they aren't very good at it. A second aspect is especially serious for the research astronomer, even if he or she is good at communicating. This is the hard fact that many employing organisations do not regard communication and outreach as a real part of the "job description". Hence, the researchers may not only be unrewarded for the time taken for public communication, they may even effectively be at a disadvantage if outreach is not perceived as a merit in the same way as grants, refereed papers and so on. The final hurdle is that a number of organisations (especially those outside the USA) have not yet integrated public communication (or "science and society") into their own structure by providing the necessary support—notably funding, training, infrastructure and personnel.

Setting up the website was a very important step in providing a focus for the activities as well as an obvious means of promoting the group's existence and providing a key link for those interested in volunteering for work. Dennis and I are immensely grateful to Lars and his colleagues for designing and constructing the website ([www.communicatingastronomy.org](http://www.communicatingastronomy.org)) and to ESO for hosting it.

## ACTIVITIES

The IAU is always keen to ensure that its activities span the globe and so the organisers canvassed colleagues (mainly astronomers who were IAU members) to become members of the Working Group Organising (or Executive body) Committee. Their names can also be found at the webpage.

The Washington Charter has its own section on the web and one of the key activities of the group was the promulgation of the charter to various agencies and societies, a number of whom have signed up.

One of the key areas for future efforts is a compendium of sites and information for those that wish to have access to sites that we know have high standards and promote professional information. This could be looked on as some form of 'one-stop' activity whereby enquirers can be passed on to other sites that have a 'kite-mark' of approval in the professional sense. This would then be an aid to those who seek astronomy information but do not have the knowledge to sort out the factual from the bogus.

Finally, excellent progress has been made on organising the third conference in the series, as we sit here now in CAP2005.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Looking firstly at this current meeting, the earlier Washington meeting had specific charges and followed a workshop theme to explore these. Here we have chosen a different path and are looking more towards consolidation and moving forward by sharing best practice, exchanging information and lessons learned, networking and, of course, enjoying ourselves. We have not completely forgotten the workshop theme, however. Originally we were intending to have an additional day aimed specifically at the image processing and virtual repository groups, but as the conference organisation got under way it became clear that we should roll it all into one. We now have a range of skills-based workshops covering image processing through press releases. I'm sure these will be a huge success and of benefit.

Finally, regarding this meeting, one of the key aspects for us is your input. This is most welcome and you are all encouraged to grab myself, Dennis or Lars at any time during the week.

Looking to the future, it is clear that there is an enormous amount of work to do, although having full-time day-jobs means that moving forward rapidly is rather a strain. We are very eager to have keen volunteers who are prepared to take on tasks and then go and deliver. As those who have responsibility for webpages will know only too well, maintenance of pages is a significant issue. We are looking to release

funds to assist in this area as well as provide backup for the day-to-day activities of the Working Group. On the other hand, we are conscious that there is already a huge amount of excellent material and work going on 'out there' and so we are also working to ensure that we do not tread on others' toes and possibly alienate people in the process. We see our role primarily as facilitators and helpers, pointing people in the right direction rather than an end in itself.

We are also preparing for the input to the IAU General Assembly that will be held in Prague in 2006. I will be attending the Astronomical Society of the Pacific meeting in Tucson in September this year with the main aim of networking with the US amateur groups and seeing how they can help in spreading the word to the public and what the IAU can do for them. Finally, we are now looking towards CAP2007. We will review how this meeting has gone and what has come out of it and in so doing focus on a theme for the meeting to come.

In general there is much work to be done on promulgating the Washington Charter and we are actively seeking volunteers to promote this and have it adopted by their societies and agencies. In general we need to continue to encourage and support those who wish to undertake outreach by raising its profile and attempting to fight against prejudice. We also need to focus on bringing 'best practice' into the domain of those who will benefit and use the web as the medium. This does not only mean those that deliver astronomy outreach, but also funding agencies, for example. The need to develop a web-base of material is now obvious given the data explosion in astronomy. This leads naturally into the virtual repository etc, of which we will hear more during this week.

Finally, and this is aimed at all the audience, we need to develop an email list of 'supporters' and to issue regular updates of progress. So please, if you feel you can commit to this, sign up!

Enjoy the meeting.