

Science communication and the European Union — options for funding!

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Abstract

Science communication is a relatively new, but definitely emerging field, often in critical need of funding options for its innovative projects. Besides the national funding agencies, the European Union (EU) also offers some options for funding. However, finding these EU grants for science communication projects is not an easy task. This paper aims to help those seeking funding by summarising information about the EU's main programmes that are potentially useable for science communication projects.

Introduction

In general people do not associate the European Union (EU) with exciting science communication. But there are some signs suggesting that this picture is changing. One of these signs is that the EU recently launched a site on YouTube¹, an unquestionable signal of openness towards the newest technological communication achievements. Another interesting example is the ATHENAweb site, which aims to become the central portal for European science communication videos. The ATHENAweb site² is financed from EU grants. This latter project demonstrates how the EU manages science communication projects by providing indirect funding for projects through open, competitive calls for tenders.

Science communicators often complain that it is not easy to find EU funding resources for their activities. This cannot be denied. The structure of EU policies is rather complex, and science communication funding can be tracked inside different policy fields. In order to find the relevant funding options, there are two possible routes to follow: the EU's research policy, and the EU's policy supporting new technological achievements.

1. Science communication in the EU's research policy field

1.1 Basic information

The 7th Research and Development Framework Programme³ (FP7) is the EU's main instrument to provide funding for European research and technological development projects. FP7 will run for

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/eutube>

² <http://www.athenaweb.org/>

³ http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/home_en.html

seven years (until 2013), with an overall budget of 50,521 MEUR. FP7 is divided into four Specific Programmes (SP):

1. Cooperation (32,413 MEUR);
2. Ideas (7,510 MEUR);
3. People (4,750 MEUR);
4. Capacities (4,097 MEUR).

Each Specific Programme contains several themes. To find funding options for astronomy communication projects one has to consult the Capacities Specific Programme's Science in Society⁴ (SiS) theme for open Calls. The SiS theme has an overall budget of 330 MEUR for the seven years.

Astronomy science communicators often work in international teams connecting people from different countries and continents. For these cross-continental projects, besides the Capacities SP's Science in Society theme, the International Cooperation⁵ (INCO) theme of the Capacities SP also offers funding possibilities. INCO runs with an overall budget of 180 MEUR for the seven years.

1.2 Eligibility rules

All FP7 projects need a European dimension. In other words, only consortia of partners from different countries can apply (with some exceptions described in the call for tenders). This means in practice that the consortium has to consist of at least three legal entities coming from different EU Member States or Associated Countries. However, these rules vary from call to call. Always check the call's rule for the relevant information. Activities that can be better carried out at national or regional level, i.e. without co-operation across borders, will not be eligible under the Framework Programme. The following list provides the basic categories of eligible countries:

- EU Member States (27);
- Countries associated to FP7 (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland, Israel, Turkey, Croatia, Serbia);
- Third countries (non-EU and non-associated);
- Countries with S&T agreement (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Chile, Egypt, India, Mexico, Morocco, Russia, South Africa, Tunisia, Ukraine, USA).

1.3 Information sources

FP7 has a complex set of participation rules. All these are available on the main website of the programme⁶. Updated information about open calls can be found on the "Find a Call" page⁷ of the FP7 website.

In order to provide additional help for applicants, the EU, in collaboration with its Member States and Associated States, established the system of National Contact Points (NCP); a network of professional EU FP7 officers. The list of these people can be found on the "Get support" page⁸ of the FP7 website.

⁴ http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/capacities/science-society_en.html

⁵ http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/capacities/international-cooperation_en.html

⁶ http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/home_en.html

⁷ <http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/dc/index.cfm>

⁸ http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/get-support_en.html

1.4 Calls for the attention of science communicators

There are some calls to be published in 2008 that could support science communication projects:

- 5.2.⁹ Gender and research (IYA2009 relevance);
- 5.3.1.1 The provisions of reliable and timely scientific information for the press and media;
- 5.3.1.2 Training actions to bridge the gap between the media and the scientific community;
- 5.3.1.3 Encouraging a European dimension at science events targeting the public (IYA2009 relevance);
- 5.3.1.4 Promoting science by audiovisual means in European co-production and the circulation of science programmes.

1.5 Some practical advice

- Always contact the NCP in your country for help.
- Choose your project partners carefully; only invite partners who you think will comply with the obligations.
- The consortium coordinator should always be experienced in EU project management.

2. EU grants for new technological achievements

Nowadays science communication, in particular in the field of astronomy, relies on, and contributes to, the evolution of new technological developments such as new internet-based applications and audiovisual tools. There are two major EU grant programmes that provide support for these types of projects:

- eContentPlus;
- MEDIA 2007.

2.1 The eContentPlus programme

2.1.1 Basic information

The aim of this multi-annual programme is to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable. The programme addresses areas that have public interest and which would not develop (or would develop at a slower pace) if left to market forces¹⁰.

The projects financed under this scheme have to be based on a proven state-of-the-art technical solution, so this grant cannot be used for technological innovation, but for innovation in organisation and in deployment.

2.1.2 Eligibility rules

The Work Programme of the grant defines so-called target areas, where the programme aims to maximise impact:

- Geographic information;
- Educational content;
- Digital libraries;

⁹ Call identification number

¹⁰ eContentPlus — A multi-annual Community programme to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable (2005-2008); Work Programme 2007, page 3.

- Reinforcing cooperation between digital content stakeholders.

For the purpose of the programme, the following definitions apply:

- Geographic information: any data that directly refers to a specific location or geographical area.
- Educational content: digital content that can be used for learning in different context both in formal and informal education.
- Digital libraries: organised collections of digital content made available for the public by cultural and scientific institutions and private content holders in the EU Member States and the other participating countries of the programme¹¹.

There are three project types that are eligible for funding:

- Targeted projects (TP);
- Thematic Network (TN);
- Best Practice Networks (BPN).

Targeted projects are open for the areas “educational content” and “digital libraries”. Projects should aim to solve specific, known problems by pooling the resources of interested and affected participants in a consortium.

Thematic Networks are open for the area of “reinforcing cooperation between digital content stakeholders”. The aim of bringing the stakeholders together is to define best practices, building consensus in order to better coordinate the availability and usability of digital content.

Lastly, the Best Practice Networks are designed to serve the areas “geographic information”, “educational content” and “digital libraries”. The expected outcome of these formations is to promote the adoption of standards and specifications that could enable users to access and use the digital content of certain areas. This type of activity would implement the “Thematic Networks” in practice.

A common eligibility criterion of all the three types of activity is the requirement to have a European dimension to the activity.

2.1.3 Practical information

The current eContentPlus programme runs until the end of 2008. The last calls will be published during the course of 2008. The new eContentPlus multi-annual programme will be published before 2009. For more detailed information the main website of the programme can be consulted¹².

2.2 MEDIA 2007

The series of four MEDIA programmes have provided support for the European audiovisual industry since 1991, helping to make successful movies such as *Breaking the waves*, *Goodbye*

¹¹ For all areas, the following countries are eligible for funding: 27 EU Member States and Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein, Croatia, Turkey, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Other countries can also participate in consortiums, but without financial support from the EU. The up-to-date information about the participating countries can be found on <http://ec.europa.eu/econtentplus>

¹² <http://ec.europa.eu/econtentplus>

Lenin, Secrets and Lies and the *Le Fabuleux destin d'amelie Poulain*, just to list some. Science movies are still missing from this list, although the possibility is also open to them!

MEDIA 2007 is the successor to the former MEDIA programmes, covering the years from 2007-2013, providing the European audiovisual industry with an overall budget of 755 MEUR.

The programme supports different activities of the pre- and post-production phases of film-making:

- Training (scriptwriting techniques, digital technologies, economic and financial management);
- Development;
- Distribution;
- Promotion and festivals;
- Horizontal actions and pilot projects.

Calls are submitted on a yearly basis. Most of the calls for 2007 are closed by now, so interested applicants will have to wait until 2008. The time can be used for learning more about the programme, for which the best source is the webpage of MEDIA 2007¹³.

Conclusions

EU-offered grants for science communication projects are not the easiest way to get funding, but they have the clear advantage of being favourable towards international consortia, which is an element often missing in national grants. EU projects require hard work at all levels. Project preparation, application, management and reporting are demanding, but it pays back well in the case of a successful project. Professional help for EU projects is also available in every EU country both from public bodies and also from the private sector. EU relevant websites provide all the information one needs and should be browsed briefly before approaching the EU professionals.

¹³ http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/media/overview/index_en.htm