

Putting EuroPlaNet on the news — The European Planetary Science Congress 2007 case study

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Abstract

In this article we analyse the exercise of science communication through a very particular medium and in a very specific work environment: the press office of the II European Planetary Science Congress in Potsdam, Germany, from the 19–24 August 2007, hosted by EuroPlaNet — the European Planetology Network. During this event, the most important discoveries and research in planetary science recently made in Europe were presented and discussed by the scientific community. It was the press office's task to try to put these discoveries and research on the news.

Introduction

Let us first contextualise the scope of our case study: what is EuroPlaNet? EuroPlaNet was created in 2005 to bring together the European researchers working in planetary science by setting up an interdisciplinary European Planetary Science Network (EuroPlaNet) and in this way achieving a long-term integration of the discipline in Europe. It is a pan-European organisation involving institutes from seventeen different countries and deals both with planetary science and its communication.

The network's objectives are to increase the productivity of planetary projects with European investment, with emphasis on major planetary exploration missions; to initiate a long-term integration of the European planetary science community; to improve European scientific competitiveness, develop and spread expertise in this research area and to improve public understanding of planetary environments. Since its creation in 2005, the organisation has worked on implementing an outreach strategy, which is now beginning to bear fruit. This strategy was one of the founding stones of the contract that led to the formation of EuroPlaNet. The press office at the annual congress plays a major role within the organisation's communication strategy.

The press office, step by step

At the end of June the press office took the first steps when it received the 512 abstracts accepted for the Congress. The first task was to go through all of them and to identify those with possible interest to the media. The main search key word was results, but other topics like scientific relevance, proximity, major discoveries, new angle or human interest were also considered. There was also some input from the conveners of each panel who gave their opinion on the talks they considered of special scientific interest.

In mid July, a preliminary list of 67 abstracts had already been prepared. Some would probably be under embargo or could be combined into a joint release with other talks on similar topics. After some first contacts and analyses, the list came down to 35 abstracts. The objective was to prepare and send out around 15 to 20 press releases under embargo to journalists before the Congress.

It was now time for the next important step in this process: contacting the scientists. This was done by e-mail, using a template with some questions that would allow the press office to know if the story was worth following up. In case of a positive response, further information (papers, etc) would be asked for, to complement the data we already had.

The modus operandi would be to write a text announcing and describing a finding or discovery, using language aimed at news media (print and broadcast reporters) and the general public, based on text supplied by the lead research scientist, but re-written for news focus and style. The final text would have to be approved by the scientist.

The process of the production of the press releases occurred without problems as far as the relation to the press office and the scientists is concerned. Overall, they were extremely helpful, patient and willing to collaborate. However, at least in the first contacts, one could not help but noticing a certain discomfort, distrust and even surprise from the scientists when asked for information and told it would be used for media release purposes.

Next we present some comments collected during these contacts that we believe illustrate many of the known problems that the complicated relationship between science and the media faces, like lack of knowledge regarding “news value”, bad experiences in the past, lack of experience in science communication, some distrust in the work of the press office and sometimes even an uncontrollable desire to control what was being written¹.

Regarding the suitability for a press release, I'm not an expert whether my results can appeal the media or not.

Some additional information on my work... I'm not sure what it can be interesting, so I put every thing together so you can have an idea. Please feel free to take out everything you don't find useful, I wrote a lot!

[with media] We had some bad experience here in Germany. Newspapers called us “strange people”, astronomy and astrology were confounded and they made us ridiculous...

My collaborators and I would like to know more about what kind of “media release” you have in mind, particularly if the release will be available on internet. Thank you very much for providing us with more information so that we can reach a decision on this matter.

¹ As the scientists did not know that these communications would be used in this case study, their comments and remarks will remain anonymous and are maintained in their original format.

I would be very grateful to you if you let me know whether this text will be released or not and to contact me for any modifications made in the material prior to the release.

It is very important to make the above changes. I would be very grateful to you if you could send us a new draft of the press release as soon as possible.

I'm also sorry for asking it because I have never experienced press release activity. Thank you for your instruction.

Now I modified your first draft. I would appreciate it if you can accept the modification, making the press release clearer and more precise.

The modified version did not make the press release more precise and clear. This scientist's knowledge of the English language was not very good.

The second paragraph begins with "A large amount of dust...". Since there is no clear evidence yet of the amount of dust coming from comets in the Solar System, it would be better to use the phrase "A fair amount of dust..." instead.

The sentence "a large amount of dust" was taken from the abstract submitted to the Congress, therefore written by the scientist himself.

But, in spite of these minor "fears", as said before, the scientists were extremely helpful and vital to the success of the press office. Most of them understood their primal role in the science communication process and were happy and eager to help and to improve their communication skills. Some even offered to write the press release themselves!

Writing and distributing

The press office produced and distributed a total of 15 press releases from very different scientific areas, which correspond to the initial objective. The complete list of the press releases can be found online at EuroPlaNet's outreach website².

The distribution of the press releases was done mainly by three methods: distribution to the press officer's private media mailing list, distribution to AlphaGalileo³ and posting on the EuroPlanNet's outreach website.

AlphaGalileo posted all our releases, which was a precious help as it allowed us to reach a vast number of science journalists. Also, the press officer's media mailing list, with many private direct contacts of journalists, included the contact of the American Astronomical Society's press officer, who helped disseminate the releases with the American press. Reuters also picked up most of

² <http://www.europlanet-eu.org>

³ <http://www.alphagalileo.org/>

the stories and played an important role in distributing them. Many of the printed news reports referred to Reuters as the source.

Here, we must emphasise the importance for any public information officer (PIO) of keeping an organised and updated contact database of journalists and media. In this particular case, as in most situations, networking and personal contact with journalists had more effective results than distributing press releases randomly.

Press coverage results — how much, what, where and when

Because we aimed at an international coverage, it was quite hard to keep track of all the news published or aired in the different countries. Bearing in mind that the vast majority of printed publications around the world now have online versions, we opted for using the Google News Alert service and used the articles we were able to pick up on the internet to measure the results of the work of the Press Office. Although we are aware that some news has necessarily escaped this “search net”, and that this sort of search may be a little biased, we are confident that the results presented are a fair enough representation of the reality.

The clippings were collected over a period of 25 days, between the first day of the Congress (19 August) and 12 September 2007. During this period we collected 189 articles directly derived from our press releases and 14 others not directly related, but that still mentioned the Congress, giving a total of 203 news items originating from 19 different countries.

It is interesting to note that, although this was an European scientific event, the majority of news was published or aired in American media (43.1%) while only 33.2% originated in European media (please see Figure 1). An analysis of the clippings showed us we were present in a total of 110 different media, from which we can point out some media that, for their journalistic importance and

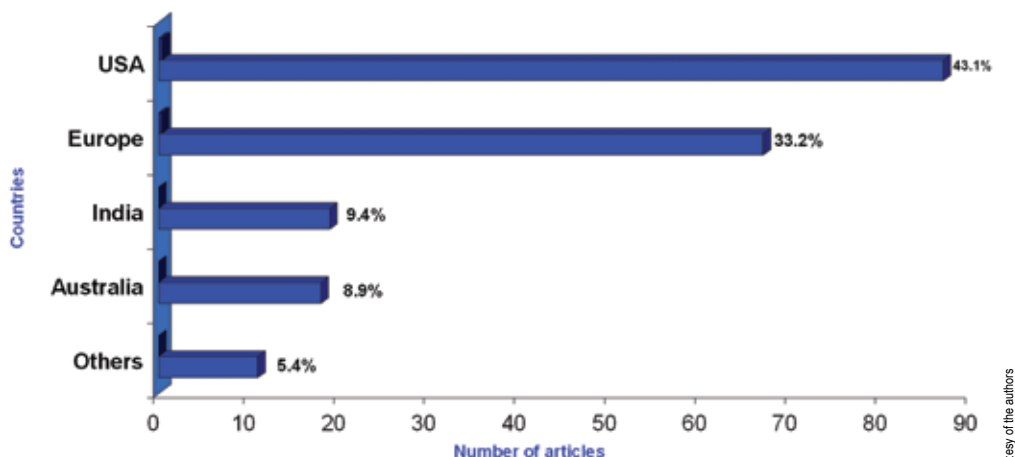


Figure 1 – Distribution of press coverage by countries

Courtesy of the authors

prestige, assume special significance for our work. These include Nature (UK), Sky & Telescope (USA), New Scientist (UK), National Geographic News (USA), The Times (UK), BBC Online (UK), CNN (USA), Scientific American (USA) and Le Monde (FR).

Conclusion

The press coverage results of this event showed us that it is possible to place science related news in the media. They also showed us that this is only possible with planning, preparation and hard work. In a word — professionalisation! The results of this press office were based on months of work, contacts and the use of all the distribution channels available. We finish by listing some practices we believe would help enhancing the visibility of European science in the media:

- Public communication of research results must be a part of the scientific process itself and not considered as an optional activity only something you do if you have the time or energy for it.
- The role of the PIO is vital in this process — his or her relationship with external audiences influences the results and products of science communication. Also, the PIO's expertise in the relevant field of research will certainly influence the quality and effectiveness of the communication process.
- Scientists and press officers need to work more closely together. In the present case study, none of the scientists contacted during the media activities for the Congress, with one or two exceptions, had prepared the communication of their results with the PIO representing their institution.
- The production of multilingual products would improve science visibility in the European press. English is the “official scientific language”. But this is not necessarily the case when we talk about European journalism, journalists and most certainly not when we talk about the European public.