

Parallel Session 10: Science communicator, is it a good profession?

THE SCIENCE COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONAL IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

The Australian Science Communicators (ASC) was formed in February 1994 in response to a demand by professionals working around Australia for an organisation that would help them to network and share ideas. Since this time science communication has become a recognised profession in Australia. This paper reports the results of a survey of science communicators and explores the questions: who are science communicators, what do they do, what influences them, and how do they see their career path.

Key words: science communicator, Australian Science Communicators, science communication

Context

The Australian Science Communicators (ASC) was formed in February 1994 in response to the demand of professionals around Australia for a forum for networking and sharing ideas. At the time it was a revelation. There was so much enthusiasm for the idea that 375 individuals across Australia agreed to become founder members.

At the time, science communication was an isolated profession. Every science organization, every division of CSIRO had one science communicator, but they had no organised way of talking to their colleagues.

There was no opportunity to share experiences or exchange ideas. Tertiary courses in science communication were at an embryonic stage. Publishing articles on science communication was a fanciful idea, and attending international meetings to discuss professional issues was almost unknown.

That was a decade ago. Now there are 465 members in ASC and science communication is a recognised profession in Australia, probably more so than in any other developed country.

Method

During May this year, a web-based survey was promoted to those on the ASC email list, to which both members and non-members can subscribe. The aim of the survey was to get a snapshot of science communication in Australia today.

Results

The web-based survey received 142 responses, with 101 (71%) of these responses being from ASC members. The majority of ASC members (56%) had been members for less than three years. The majority of respondents (77%) called themselves science communicators consistently or sometimes.

Who are science communicators?

The top five professions reported by respondents were:

- Public relations/media officer/communication officer for a science-related organisation (36%)
- Scientist doing science communication (20%)
- Freelance writer or editor (16%)
- Consultant (15%)
- Journalist (13%)

Science communicators tend to be female (61%) and between the ages of 26 and 35 (38%).

While the majority of science communicators (49%) were in full-time employment, a significant number (45%) reported part-time work as a science communicator. These results were reflected in their earnings with the majority (34%) earning between A\$40-60,00 a year, but a significant proportion (27%) earning less than A\$20,000 a year.

The vast majority of respondents (79%) had a science degree of some sort, but a significant proportion (32%) had also had formal training in science communication. The majority (54%) also thought that science communicators should hold a science degree, but a significant proportion also (42%) disagreed with this.

The majority agreed or strongly agreed (57%) that science communication was now a respected profession in Australia. They also agreed (71%) that science communication was a different profession to public relations.

What do science communicators do?

The five most common tasks reported by survey respondents were:

- Writing (94%)
- Editing (80%)
- Web development (70%)
- Partner/client/stakeholder liaison (61%)
- Event management (56%)

The least common tasks reported were:

- Political liaison/lobbying (20%)
- Communication research (23%)
- Audio-visual production (30%)

- Scientific research (30%)
- Exhibition design and management (41%)

Science communicators are most likely to interact with scientists (96%), the general community (88%), research managers (71%) and journalists (70%). They are least likely to interact with politicians (36%).

When asked to define science communication, almost all survey respondents defined it in terms of making science more meaningful to the public, whether this was through translating complex concepts or by creating a dialogue.

What influences science communicators

The biggest influence for getting people involved in science communication is an interest in science (92% said consistently or sometimes) and/or a background in science (83% said consistently or sometimes). However, training in science communication also appears to be important (49% said consistently or sometimes).

The most common occupations prior to becoming a science communicator were students (31%) followed by scientists (23%).

When science communicators were asked about what they enjoyed most about science communication, the most common responses were about:

- Translating science into laymen's language for the general public
- Meeting interesting people, including interacting with researchers
- Finding out about stimulating ideas and new scientific advances
- The varied nature of the job of a science communicator, which often involved a great deal of creativity
- Seeing the general public, including children, gain enjoyment from science

When communicators were asked what they found most frustrating about working as a science communicator, they highlighted the lack:

- of willingness by scientists to communicate
- resources, especially funding
- value put on science communication, especially by organisational managers
- appreciation by media representatives for the needs of science (for accuracy etc)
- recognition for science communication

When respondents working in organisations were asked about their status within that organisation, the majority (56%) rated it as low, while a third (31%) rated it as high.

Most ASC members found value (77% high or medium) from being a member of ASC through branch meetings, the e-list, networking and professional development.

How do science communicators see their careers developing?

The majority of respondents (51%) plan to continue working as a science communicator until retirement.

Respondents were split in their opinions about whether there were many employment opportunities in Australia (54%) or not (42%). However, only a quarter of respondents agreed there was a good career path for communicators in Australia. The majority (49%) disagreed with this statement.

What have been the key changes in the past decade?

When survey respondents were asked about the key changes over the past 10 years to science communication they highlighted the rise in the numbers of science communicators and the increased recognition and respect for the profession. They also mentioned the increase in tertiary science communication courses available and shift in focus towards commercialisation and marketing outcomes. Some cautioned about the influx in 'in-experienced operators' to science communication and the need to ensure quality science communication.

Conclusion

The survey provided a snap shot of science communication in Australia today. It needs further detailed analysis and research to determine some of the implications of for future development of science communication.

