

COMMISSION 55

COMMUNICATING ASTRONOMY WITH THE PUBLIC

PARTAGER L'ASTRONOMIE

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COMMISSION 55 WORKING GROUPS

Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	Communicating Astronomy Journal
Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	New Ways of Communicating
	Astronomy with the Public
Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	CAP Conferences
Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	Best Practices
Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	VAMP
Div. XII / Commission 55 TF	Washington Charter

TRIENNIAL REPORT 2006-2009

1. Introduction

Since its formation at the XXVI General Assembly in Prague in 2006, amazing progress has been made by Commission 55, all due to the work of the key activists and enthusiasts. The web-page for the Commission contains a wealth of information and is one of the key foundations and tools for the Commission. The web address is <http://www.communicatingastronomy.org>

The focus over the past three years has, not surprisingly, been on the International Year of Astronomy 2009 (IYA2009). This has included membership on the IAU Executive Working Group, which in itself has been no mean task. As a result, the ability to make as much progress as we had intended across the entire portfolio of C55 has been limited. Nevertheless, I am confident that the effort expounded on IYA2009 has been extremely successful so far and furthermore, this has brought about a very useful secondary focus, especially in the areas of New Media and the VAMP work (see below) and in other ways that were not envisaged in the Working Groups - such as the Galileoscope and FETTU to name but two.

2. The Washington Charter - led by Dennis Crabtree

Progress has been limited due to effort availability but the current picture is that it has been endorsed by: 19 professional astronomical societies or agencies and 12 universities, labs, facilities and other organisations.

3. VAMP - Virtual Astronomy Multimedia Project - led by Robert Hurt

Truly spectacular progress has been made on this project; there has been enormous progress on agreement on metadata and tools, culminating in the launch of 'Portal to the Universe' (<http://www.portaltotheuniverse.org/>) at the NAM/JENAM meeting in the UK in April 2009 and sponsored by the IAU and ESO. Portal to the Universe is a global, one-stop clearinghouse for online astronomy content, with news, blogs, video and audio podcasts, images, videos targeting the complete range from laypeople, press, educators, to scientists. During its first five months of operation it has aggregated 3,000 press releases; 1,800+ podcast episodes; 16,000+ blog posts and received more than 300,000 visitors. VAMP is so far an amazing success story and the web address for the work is at: <http://virtualastronomy.org/>

4. Best Practices - led by Lars Lindberg Christensen

This project has also been impacted by the IYA2009 activities but, importantly, some of the aims and best practices have been directly incorporated into the IYA activities through instructions and guidelines for organisers along with the all-important and often neglected aspect of evaluation.

5. Communicating Astronomy Journal - led by Pedro Russo

The CAP Journal has been another spectacular success story. From the initial meetings and discussions with the Astronomy Educational Review amongst others, the CAP Journal was launched in October 2007. It has a formal organisational structure and editorial board and provides a refereeing process for submitted papers. Six editions have been published to date, containing over 60 articles. There are 1,500 hard-copy subscribers and 2,700 on-line subscribers. Thanks are given to ESO who have supported the editorial and shipping costs (see later). The journal is incredibly well produced and the covers themselves are collectors' items of spectacular imagery. The web address for the journal is at <http://www.capjournal.org>.

6. New Ways of Communicating Astronomy with the Public - led by Michael West

This work has also taken off in a big way, albeit through a life of its own rather than through the Group. This is one of the amazing spin-offs that has transpired and it has resulted through the efforts of a small number of devoted 'geeks/gurus'. As well as blogging and podcasts, Twitter has recently appeared on the scene alongside Facebook and Second Life. These are all activities that are blossoming and illustrate one of the key features for the future (see below). In other areas, key examples of new ways of communicating are 'citizen science' projects like 'Galaxy Zoo', which has demonstrated that this is a vibrant way forward for the future, especially for the younger generation of producers and communicators.

7. Communicating Astronomy with the Public Conference - led by Ian Robson

There has been one CAP conference since Prague, this was CAP2007 in October 2007 in Athens. The conference was co-organized by the National Observatory of Athens and the Eugenides Planetarium and was a tremendous success, with over 200 participants. As was to be expected, much of the focus was on looking forward to IYA2009. One of the interesting features is that the CAP conferences continues to attract a significant audience from C46 (Education), even though we strive to focus on specific outreach activities. The Proceedings were published in book format as well as on-line.

8. Next Three Years

The Structure of Commission 55 for the coming three years will be as follows:

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The Business Meeting was very well attended; this was especially notable seeing as there was an unfortunate clash for the outreach/education contingent. The proposed Working Groups for the next 3 years was the topic of much discussion during the business meeting, with a range of views being expressed and some clarification being required for the IAU regarding eligibility of Working Group Chairs. The Washington Charter, CAP Journal and CAP Conferences remain unchanged, while Robert Hurt takes over as Chair of the VAMP group. The Best Practices Group has been wound up, with the activity being subsumed into other Working Groups. The most discussion surrounded the 'New Ways of Communicating Astronomy' with the Public Group, which had been proposed to have been wound up and the work subsumed into VAMP. During the debate it was clear that a better way forward was for the Group to continue with a change of name to "New Media", and to cater for the likes of Facebook, Twitter and what might follow. It was agreed that Pamela Gay would be an ideal Chair for this Group and Lars Lindberg Christensen Co-Chair.

Further discussion centred around the 'citizen science' projects and the work of the amateurs. It was felt that the projects such as 'Galaxy Zoo' readily fitted into the remit of 'New Media' but that the role of the amateurs was far from clear. Opening up astronomy centres, clubs, participating in communicating with the public was a clear and essential part of Commission 55's remit, and the roles of the amateurs in this area should be supported. However, the work of the other distinct band of 'professional amateurs' (dedicated novae, supernovae and Solar System observers) was very different and fitted far better in other Commissions or Divisions within the IAU. It was not believed that there was a single solution for the amateur community within the IAU.

Looking forward to the next three years, planning is already well underway for the CAP2010 conference. This will be held in Cape Town, from March 15th-19th 2010. The first announcement has been released and further details for the conference can be found

at: <http://www.communicatingastronomy.org>. The conference will focus on the legacy from IYA2009 and the ongoing plans for the future. There is also an associated workshop for communicating astronomy in the developing world. One of the questions that I raised was because CAP2010 was out of synch (it should have been in 2009 but we had agreed everyone would be too busy and 2010 would give the opportunity for a look-back) whether the next CAP should be in late 2011 or in 2012. From the discussion there were a number of good reasons proposed that suggests that late 2011 would be the preferred option.

It is also clear that we need to 'up' our membership; everyone should update their IAU membership list and we (Dennis Crabtree) should petition that C55 should be exempt from the '3 Commission rule'. A note will be included in the next IAU electronic newsletter requesting IAU members to join C55. We also need to make the 'next big push' on the Washington Charter following IYA2009. We need to garner more keen supporters who can influence their 'local' agencies etc. This should be one of the main thrusts and targets of the coming three years.

Portal to the Universe is an enormous success, but can it become a one-stop image repository or should we be looking to offload this or to look for other services that currently exist? Is it further expandable and if so by how much?

The CAP Journal is now in need of direct sponsorship for the printing costs and a number of suggestions were made as to possible sources as the cost is rather modest given the quality of the product. Perhaps sponsorship as in the IYA2009 brochures might be a model to follow.

Finally, there remains the very difficult problem of what do we/can we retain both nationally and globally, post IYA2009. In this I refer to all the fabulous work that has gone into IYA2009 web-pages. Maintaining web-pages requires a resource and unless one has access to a ready supply of volunteers, or has enough staff that this activity can be 'hidden', the resource means cash. This will be a serious problem for many countries and how to retain the legacy activity, often manifest through web-pages, will be a serious question facing many involved in the outreach activities.

In conclusion, let us say how satisfying the last three years have been. Commission 55 is up, running and fully committed. It has more than delivered on its targets and the work that has gone into IYA2009 activity throughout the world (and outside of C55) has been tremendous. The Commission is now poised to move forward and take the legacy of IYA2009 into the future through the Washington Charter, New Media etc to ensure that Outreach Activity is a respected and rewarded activity for all those who practice it.

Ian E. Robson
president of the Commission
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