

## **Philosophy of Science Communication: It's all about Fun, Friendship, and Social Networks**

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My philosophy of scientific communication is that 1) science communication should be fun and engaging for scientists and our audience, and 2) it should center around building social relationships and networks that facilitate outreach. While the work that goes into planning engagement projects or communicating science can sometimes be challenging and time-consuming, it needs to be personally rewarding. Often science communication is an add-on in our lives—its' deeply related to our professional identifies, but essentially somewhere between a hobby and vocation. While some people successfully build a career out of science communication, for most scientists it will always be an extra, optional addition to their lives. For me, the reason it's become a central part of my identity as a scientist, rather than an add-on, is because it's been outlet to have fun and develop relationships. When we have fun with science communication, we share our joy and enthusiasm about research with our audience. That audience is rarely an anonymous other "out there." Sometimes we can reach people we don't see, and don't know, but more often our immediate audience are the people we interact with, virtually or in person. Reaching an audience that's further "out there" requires building a network that may contain other scientists, educators, or journalists that can help us reach a wider audience.

I never thought about the concept of an "audience" before the 2016 21sci workshop. I've engaged in intermittent forms of scientific communication and outreach for at least 16 years, but that was before I considered myself a scientist or considered it "outreach." Teaching day campers about animals and developing materials for a nature center wasn't "scientific communication" to me—they were jobs. They were jobs I loved, but I took them because they were a fun way to earn money. In graduate school, I took opportunities to talk to high school students and undergraduate clubs because it was a fun distraction from my own work. Starting a blog during graduate school was my first effort at intentional science communication. I started it around the time a colleague and I had an exciting paper coming out, and I wanted to share some thoughts about the subject beyond the scope of our scientific paper. But a major motivation was my envy of other graduate students' blogs about field research, and I wanted to share the alternately humorous, miserable, and amazing parts of fieldwork with other people. However, what kept me blogging was the small network of other bloggers I developed relationships with.

Most were strangers, but through reading their blogs and commenting back and forth, we built friendships. Since then, I've met some of them in person, and though most of our blogs have fallen into occasional updates or are shuttered or deleted entirely, some of those relationships remain. Similarly, while there are many reasons I stopped blogging regularly, a major factor in its decline was the collapse of those online networks as my fellow bloggers stopped posting regularly.

Since that 2016 workshop, I given new thought to who my audience is, and how I choose to engage them. My audience is sometimes children at one-time outreach events, or occasionally strangers at a public lecture or out in the Twitterverse, but mostly they are friends or friends-of-friends. Some of the best "science communication" experiences I've had has been explaining human evolution while running with my old run club. My most challenging science communication effort was explaining, *en español*, to workers at my field station why the heck I was spending a year of my life chasing monkeys in the rainforest. My most-read blogpost was written because someone asked me for my thoughts about Harambe's death, and when I marshalled my thoughts into a coherent blog post it, it was shared through friends and friends-of-friends on Facebook. And as I began engaging more frequently on Twitter, I built up a network of "Twitter friends" that's lead to in-person friendships and new outreach opportunities. Last year I corresponded with students at Kentucky junior high and gave a Skype talk to their class, and it was entirely because their teacher is a Twitter follower who reached out to me. These relationships have helped me build an audience while honing my communication skills, and encouraged me to delve into new forms of public engagement.

I struggle with developing a focused approach to science communication, as I experiment with trying those new forms. Often, it's because it's easier to commit to one-off engagement projects, and I flit between different types of outreach. However, I'm also less interested in following one sustained form of communication. Instead, I make slow inroads with different activities I find fun, and relationships and networks develop around them. As those networks develop, new opportunities crop up. I enjoy the unexpected serendipity, and occasional challenge, of trying new things, and often my outreach efforts occur from following the new opportunities that friends and acquaintances present. Recently, friends have shared some new public engagement opportunities that I find both exciting and terrifying. I'm trying to decide which ones to commit to, and how much I should challenge myself to try forms of outreach

outside my comfort zone. But ultimately, what I decided will depend on what provides an opportunity to share my joy of research with a new audience, and the potential for relationships to build through sharing that joy.