

Explained in 60 seconds: CAP – Communicating Astronomy with the Public Conferences

Ramasamy Venugopal

CAP conferences Working Group chair
rv@astro4dev.org

Samir Dhurde

CAP conferences Working Group chair
samir@iucaa.in

Richard Tresch Fienberg

American Astronomical Society,
 Past President, IAU Commission C2
rick.fienberg@aas.org

Oana Sandu

President, Commission C2,
 Communicating Astronomy with the Public
osandu@partner.eso.org

The Communicating Astronomy with the Public (CAP) Conference brings together professionals from around the world to exchange ideas and practices on astronomy communication. It is organised by the CAP Conference Working Group, under IAU Commission C2, and the Office for Astronomy Outreach.

Early history — Bringing the community together

The CAP conference series traces its origin to “Communicating Astronomy,” an international meeting held in February 2002 in Spain (*Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias (IAC), 2002*). Organised chiefly by Terry Mahoney of the IAC Scientific Editorial Service, the conference attracted nearly 70 participants and addressed a variety of topics in publishing, broadcasting, education, and public outreach. Most presentations concerned academic publishing, yet among the attendees were numerous public information officers, science journalists, and others working as intermediaries between astronomers and the public. One of them, Charles Blue of the U.S. National Radio Astronomy Observatory, decided to organise a meeting for that constituency.

The “Conference on Communicating Astronomy to the Public” convened in October 2003 in Washington, D.C., and attracted nearly 250 participants (*Blue, 2010*). It led to some significant outcomes, including a draft of the Washington Charter for Communicating Astronomy with the Public (*Robson, 2007*), the establishment of a working group that eventually became the International Astronomical Union (IAU) Commission 55 (now C2), and a commitment to hold Communicating Astronomy with the Public (CAP) conferences every two to three years. The first one held under the auspices of the IAU was CAP 2005 at the European Southern Observatory Headquarters in Germany. CAP 2007 in Greece played a central role in planning the International Year of Astronomy 2009 (IYA2009), while CAP 2010 in South Africa focused on the outcome of the IYA2009 activities, their evaluation, and plans for future work. It was during the planning

for this conference that organisers introduced key topics to unite the conference under a single theme. This structure has been adopted for all subsequent CAP conferences beginning with CAP 2011 in China.

2013-2016 — Professionalisation of the conference

In 2013, after the CAP conference in Poland, the working group implemented a survey among participants that provided the basis to set new standards for the conference: more robust evaluation of conference hosts and submissions; extended programme with workshops, networking sessions, and parallel sessions; high-level invited speakers; and increasing participant numbers. CAP 2016 saw about 250 participants, while CAP 2018 had almost 450.

2016-2018 — Sustainability and inclusion

To be more mindful of the environment, the working group introduced criteria to encourage ‘green’ conferencing practices. As of 2016 in Colombia, this included the use of sustainable accommodation and transportation, the elimination of single-use plastic, and the reduction of print products, as well as recycling.

Another priority was to make the conference more inclusive. The topic of Diversity, Inclusion, Equity and Empathy was added as one of the sub-themes of the conference. In addition, conference hosts were asked about practical steps to ensure inclusivity, such as the provision of daycare, a quiet room, and accessibility of venues to people with disabilities.

2021-2022 — Virtual and hybrid

After the highly successful 2018 conference in Japan (*Canas, Agata, Yamaoka, & Karino, 2019*), the CAP conference had to move online during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first virtual CAP conference attracted 1,000 participants from 87 countries, who spent, on average, 17 hours attending talks and poster sessions, participating

in workshops, and networking (*CAP Conference 2021, 2021*). Due to the continued uncertainty in global travel and to accommodate participants, the 2022 conference was held in hybrid mode — in Australia and online. Future events will likely continue in this hybrid format, enabling more participants to learn from and contribute to the rich discussions.

Since 2005, nine CAP conferences have been organised with more than 10,000 participants. The conference series has provided a space for the growing, diverse, global community of astronomy communicators to meet, learn, exchange ideas, and collaborate. We are grateful to the IAU and supporters, as well as the global team of volunteers who run the conference.

References

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