Explained in 60 Seconds: Pro-Am

Best Practices

Key Words

Written Communication
Case Study

While professional astronomers are lucky enough to make a career out of their passion, amateur astronomers enjoy observing the night sky purely for the pleasure of seeing distant celestial objects. But there is a new breed of amateur astronomer who wants to take their hobby further — and professional astronomers are now recognising how amateurs can help them with their research. Such cooperation between professional and amateur astronomers is referred to as a Pro-Am collaboration.

A good example of a Pro-Am project is long-term observational studies by amateurs that are too time-consuming for professional astronomers to even consider undertaking themselves. An alternative type of Pro-Am project involves amateurs working on their own initiative to make important observations and discoveries of, for example, supernovae, which are then followed-up by professionals. For example, in 2009 and 2010, amateur astronomers were the first to spot impacts on Jupiter, with their observations then pursued using professional telescopes.

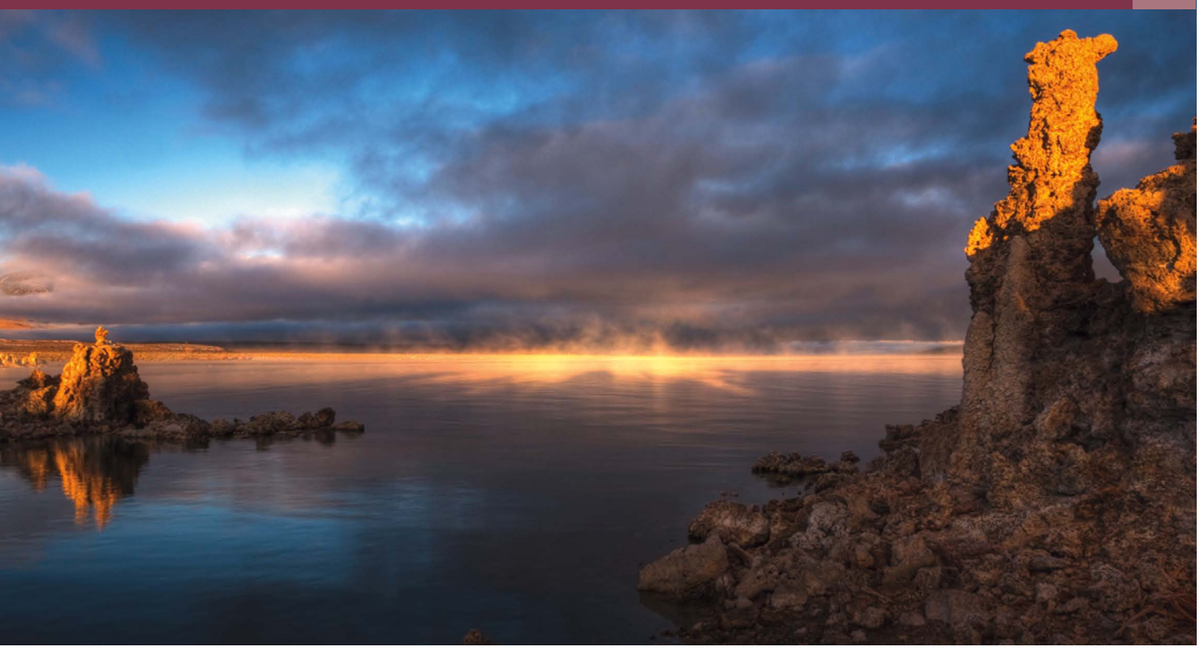
The sudden surge in Pro-Am collaborations is partly due to the affordability nowadays of cutting edge equipment, like large (8-inch or more) telescopes and high-spec CCD cameras, which bring faint celestial objects firmly within the reach of amateurs.

Hopefully in the future the number of Pro-Am projects will continue to grow, as they are greatly beneficial to advancing our understanding of how the Universe works.

Text crowd-sourced with valuable inputs from Jean-Luc Dighaye (EurAstro)and Sarah Reed (ESO). A list of PRO-AM collaborative projects in Astronomy can be found on line: http://goo.gl/WzKL2

News

The Mono Lake Research area in central California (USA) has a central role in the most controversial science media story of 2010. NASA-supported researchers have announced the discovery of the first known microorganism on Earth able to thrive and reproduce using the toxic chemical arsenic. The microorganism, which lives in California's Mono Lake, substitutes arsenic for phosphorus in the backbone of its DNA and other cellular components. However the scientific community, journalists and new media activists have been very vocal against the way NASA hyped the story as well as the veracity of the findings. Maybe 2011 will bring some light into this. Credit: NASA



Taming the Watchdog

Opinion

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Key Words

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Pitching a Story
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Summary

Talking to the media about a particular expertise or passion might seem easy, but not knowing certain details of the media interaction process often prevents science communicators from sharing their knowledge and expressing their enthusiasm to journalists and, through them, to their final audience, the public. Here is some advice on how to make the most of talking to the press.

One of the oldest roles of the mass media has been compared to that of a watchdog, guarding the public space by deciding which pieces of information are allowed through. In the process of communicating science to the public, science communicators will often resort to mass media channels as a way of reaching out to a greater target audience. Inevitably, this leads to contact with journalists who will then decide if or how the story is actually published.

Communication between science communicators and journalists is challenging because a misstep anywhere in the process can mean failure or success. So it is crucial for a communicator to develop media relations skills that can help to get a story across.

So how can the watchdog be tamed so that the communicator can cross the threshold into media territory and reach the interested audience at the other end? There is no specific recipe, but there are some basic steps that can help make the process not only less difficult, but also more pleasant.

There are two general cases when science communicators interact with the media: proactive communication, when the communicator pitches a story to journalists, and reactive communication when journalists request information from the communicator.

Case 1: Make the watchdog your friend

It is natural to think that media relations start when a dialogue begins between the two parties, communicators and journalists, and that the most important aspect in media relations is what one party says and sells. However, there is another step, before contact is even made, which is even of greater importance as it determines how the relationship kicks off — research!

According to standard communication strategies, the first step a communicator should take is to research the relevant media target, as well as the organisation and the sector where it is active. The primary objective of this research is to get to know the mass media channels and its journalists in as much detail as the journalists are supposed to know their own target audience.

Communicators should be familiar with the specifics of each targeted media channel in a depth that goes far beyond the obvious issues — for example, be aware of the difference between communications that target written publications versus television, or radio versus online. Other important details are a media outlet's editing policies, its planning of monthly topics for the current year, favoured topics, its area of coverage, whether it has a science journalism department (and its size), the names of the journalists covering science, deadlines, format and style of written/broadcast materials.

Most of this information is usually easily accessible, but gathering it is a time-consuming process. The first place to look is the website of the mass media channel, where editing policies, the mission statement, departments and the names of journalists working for the media channel are all available. Sometimes media channels will even upload presentations about their targets onto their websites, that is, information about their reach, distribution, audience or traffic — all fascinating numbers for any communicator. For future topics or thematic numbers/editions/shows contact the editor-in-chief/producer and simply ask for this information. In most cases, they will gladly share it with you. Make sure you also ask for any deadlines that they might have for submitting press releases or pitching a story that is in line with the topic.

Communicators should also carry out research at the personal level. Journalists in your database should be more than just the people you talk to when you have something to communicate on behalf of your organisation. They should be your professional friends, or, even better, simply your friends.