Translational Research Communication: a new experience

Blog post by Sally Hofmeyr
8 April 2014

Academics are like optical fibre. They generate communication about their research along exceptionally narrow channels. Their research communication is almost exclusively focused on their discipline – to their conferences and their journals. In today's world, though, in order for academics to remain relevant and succeed in finding funding and institutional support, that fibre must expand to become a funnel, or if you like, a trumpet. Academics need to be able to make their research accessible to a broader community. This is not a luxury or an add-on; it is essential for the survival of the species.

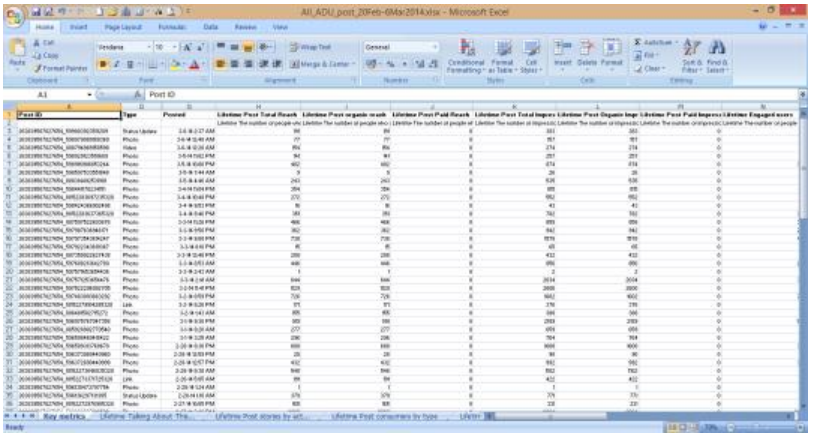
In January this year I started a postdoc on "Translational Research Communication". The project is an innovative collaboration between the **Animal Demography Unit (ADU)** and **OpenUCT**. If you can't work out what the title of my project means, don't worry – I couldn't either, at first. In ordinary language, the project is all about science communication: making science accessible to the public. Specifically, in this case, biological science, and even more specifically, biological science that involves citizen science.

Photo: Citizen science in action in the Overberg, Western Cape (by Sally Hofmeyr)

The ADU, where I did my PhD, manages a number of large-scale citizen science projects. These are projects in which members of the public, or citizen scientists, participate. These citizen scientists contribute data to the ADU, in the form of photographs, bird lists, bird counts and bird ringing data. The photographs can be of a wide range of life forms, and even of bird nests – they just have to have a location and date associated with them in order to be useful (you can read more about the ADU and citizen science **here**). I used data from two of these projects for **my PhD analyses**, so I know well just how useful and valuable these data can be.

So that has been my world at UCT up until now – using citizen science data to work out what's going on with bird populations, using statistical methods to tease out the real story from the noise, and being sure to be as strictly scientific and objective about everything as it's possible to be. Now, I find myself doing not science, but science communication, which among other things involves working with people rather than birds – a different kettle of disciplines altogether.

When I sat down and tried to work out what I would be doing, the first question that came up was: where's the data? I have to have data to work on, don't I? Initially, that did not appear to be the case – communicating with the public is not about analysing data! However, I was then tasked with compiling a spreadsheet (hooray – I know how to do spreadsheets!) listing all the ADU's popular science communication activities. The contents of the spreadsheet are, naturally, far more descriptive than quantitative, and what we need to measure about each communication activity turns out to be surprisingly difficult to identify. It is also, of course, different for each type of communication. For instance, how do you measure the reach and impact of a blog, a Facebook post, a magazine article and a radio talk show? You certainly can't measure them all in the same way. The ADU is incredibly active on Facebook, and luckily for me, Facebook is really rather good at providing all sorts of data about the reach and impact of posts. So that one shouldn't be too hard. But, radio talk shows?? That's going to be a bit more challenging.



A sample of the ADU Facebook Insights data

What else am I doing as part of my Translational Research Communication postdoc? Well I am going to be analysing and helping to streamline the ADU's communication process, using a methodology called **CHAT (which stands for Cultural-Historical Activity Theory)**, and I will be working with people who are involved in education to get ADU material and projects into the classroom. I'm also doing some communicating of my own, **on Facebook**, on the radio, and on this blog, and I hope to expand that in the months to come. Finally, I will be communicating with the academic world, by writing some academic articles on the ADU's communication process. I'm sure there will be much more that ends up becoming part of this postdoc too, and that I will be surprised to learn just how much goes into Translational Research Communication.

Comments

Birds & education

Submitted by Peter Ginn on Tue, 04/08/2014 - 21:28

This sounds fascinating although I am not sure I understand all you are intending to do. I trust you will succeed in getting the info and data into the classroom which I believe to be the most important place to be!!

science communicatiion

Submitted by Marina Joubert on Wed, 04/09/2014 - 12:19

Thank you for this interesting blog, Sally. I would love to make contact with you. I'm currently busy developing a science communication curriculum (M.Phil) as part of my own doctoral studies. marina[at]southernscience.co.za

Comments from 8 and 9 April

Submitted by Sally Hofmeyr on Thu, 04/10/2014 - 11:20

Hi Peter,
Thanks for the encouragement! Getting new and inspiring material into the classroom is definitely a very important part of this work, for me. I have met with a couple of people who have relevant contacts or are in a position to make this happen, which is very exciting.

Hi Marina,
Great -- that sounds very interesting! I will email you shortly.

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