

Science communication

By Margrit Beemster

I recently attended the Australian Science Communicators National Conference in Sydney and must admit I came back very much inspired! It was an excellent conference on all levels and has given me lots of ideas on how the effort we put into communications at the Institute can be more effective.

As to be expected over the three days of the conference the use of social media as a means of communicating science came up on many occasions. Whether we like it or not, it is far too powerful a communication tool to be ignored. The opening plenary session of the conference was by Australia's Chief Scientist Prof Ian Chubb who announced that Australian [ScienceAlert](#) website had just gained its millionth fan on worldwide internet phenomenon [Facebook](#); a milestone which makes ScienceAlert.com.au the world's number one provider of science news on Facebook according to its managing director Chris Cassella.

While that's fantastic and on-line science websites like Science Alert and [The Conversation](#) are doing a great job at ensuring science news is presented accurately and fairly, what is so concerning about the amazing growth of social media is that there really is no control of what gets up on Facebook and the like. Information can be presented as science without ever having to go through the rigor of being peer-reviewed and before you know it that 'science' is influencing the public and politicians are using it for political purposes. So it is now more important than ever, according to the chief scientist, that academics speaking publicly in their area of expertise.

While it was recognised that "you can't make a good communicator out of every scientist", presentations at the conference included lots of tips on how science communicators can help scientists communicate better. My intention is to incorporate some of these into what I do in my role as the Institute's communication coordinator.

For example the advice for those scientists who are considering creating their own Blog sites as a way of communicating their science to a wider audience (as the Institute's [A/Prof Ian Lunt](#) and [Dr Paul Humphries](#) have done) is to write about what you love; give readers something that is different, and, if appropriate, humorous; and give them something no one else is giving them.

There were also plenty of stories about the success of using short video clips to communicate science by putting them on youtube. Recently CSU media officer Wes Ward and I have been working on producing a series of [short videos](#) and while we won't have the resources or time to do one for everyone's research, ILWS web page person Simone and I are thinking about how we can produce simple short video clips to promote our scientists' work.

Soimagine you are in an elevator with the person who can give you funding for your great project and you have just one minute to get your message across. What would you say? The conference also covered topics such as such as what's new in science television, campaigns to get dollars for research, and making science policy – one of the messages from this one was that policy people rely on google to find out their information so it has to be easy to understand; another was making sure you involve your local Members in what you are trying to do.

Another highlight for me was winning a full copy of the recently released [Australia state of the environment 2011 report](#) which is an independent report presented to the Australian Government Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. If you would like to have a look at the full report, let me know.

