

## COMMISSION 55

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## COMMUNICATING ASTRONOMY WITH THE PUBLIC

*PARTAGER L'ASTRONOMIE*

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## COMMISSION 55 WORKING GROUPS

Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	Washington Charter
Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	VAMP
Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	Best Practices
Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	Communicating Astronomy Journal
Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	New Ways of Communicating Astronomy with the Public
Div. XII / Commission 55 WG	CAP Conferences

## TRIENNIAL REPORT 2006 - 2009

### 1. Introduction

Commission 55 was approved at the IAU XXVI General Assembly in Prague, 2006, following the great success of the Working Group *Communicating Astronomy*, which had been set up in 2003. It resides within Division XII and the mission statement of the WG has been incorporated into the Commission:

- to encourage and enable a much larger fraction of the astronomical community to take an active role in explaining what we do (and why) to our fellow citizens;
- to act as an international, impartial coordinating entity that furthers the recognition of outreach and public communication on all levels in astronomy;
- to encourage international collaborations on outreach and public communication; and
- to endorse standards, best practices and requirements for public communication

The first point is particularly important as, in principle; it is something over which we have some control or influence. It is now widely recognised that there are a number of barriers to communicating astronomy. Firstly, a number of professional astronomers do not feel comfortable with the very concept of talking with the public. Secondly, many of the employing organisations do not regard communication and outreach as a real part of

the ‘job description’. Hence, the time taken for public communication may not only go unrewarded for the researchers, it may well go against the researcher in effect if outreach is not counted as a merit in the same way as grants, refereed papers, etc. The final hurdle is that a number of organisations (especially those outside the USA) have not yet integrated public communication (or ‘science and society’) into their own organisational structure by providing the necessary support funding, training, infrastructure, personnel, etc.

To forward the work of the Commission, an extensive web-page has been set up: <[www.communicatingastronomy.org](http://www.communicatingastronomy.org)>. This charts the history of the WG leading to the Commission and lists its organisation and officers. Indeed, this portal holds the key to the success of the Commission and all the information relating to the work is contained therein. Because of the nature of the work of the Commission, we are anxious to encourage as many people as possible to become active and spread the word. In that light we have set up a section where enthusiasts can sign-in as ‘supporters’, on whom we can call for general or specific tasks and propagation of information.

The actual work of the Commission has been split up into six Working Groups:

- *Washington Charter* (chair: Dennis Crabtree)
- *Virtual Astronomy Multimedia Project – VAMP* (chair: Adrienne Gauthier)
- *Best Practices* (chair: Lars Lindberg Christensen)
- *Communicating Astronomy Journal* (chair: Pedro Russo)
- *New Ways of Communicating Astronomy with the Public* (chair: Michael West)
- *Communicating Astronomy with the Public conferences* (chair: Ian Robson)

## 2. The Washington Charter

One of the key activities of the original Working Group *Communicating Astronomy* was the promulgation of the Washington Charter, which arose from the 2003 meeting in Washington, DC, USA. The Charter outlines *Principles of Action* for individuals and organizations that conduct astronomical research and that have a compelling obligation to communicate their results and efforts with the public for the benefit of all.

Although well received and heavily endorsed, a few organizations were hesitant in their endorsement of the original version because of the strong language used in the Charter. The Charter was subsequently revised in terms of softening the language without altering the strong message contained and the ownership passed to the WG *Communicating Astronomy* and hence to Commission 55 and its sub-group.

The preamble to the Charter clearly states the rationale for the priority that those of us involved in astronomical research need to give to communicating with the public: As our world grows ever more complex and the pace of scientific discovery and technological change quickens, the global community of professional astronomers needs to communicate more effectively with the public. Astronomy enriches our culture, nourishes a scientific outlook in society, and addresses important questions about humanity’s place in the universe. It contributes to areas of immediate practicality, including industry, medicine, and security, and it introduces young people to quantitative reasoning and attracts them to scientific and technical careers. Sharing what we learn about the universe is an investment in our fellow citizens, our institutions, and our future. Individuals and organizations that conduct astronomical research – especially those receiving public funding for this research – have a responsibility to communicate their results and efforts with the public for the benefit of all. The success of the wording was that the AAS endorsed the revised Charter at their June 2006 meeting in Calgary, Canada. At the moment, the Charter

has been endorsed by 31 organisations, but work in pushing this forward has taken a back-seat to the major efforts of Commission 55: preparations for the *International Year of Astronomy 2009* (IYA 2009).

### 3. Virtual Astronomy Multimedia Project- VAMP

Good progress has been made on VAMP and much of this will feed into the *Portal to the Universe* cornerstone project for IYA 2009 - which will have huge benefits when it is finally launched. The VAMP project web page is: <[www.virtualastronomy.org/](http://www.virtualastronomy.org/)>. One of the key results of this work is a now globally accepted standard for metadata for PR imagery called *Astronomy Visualization Metadata 1.1*.

### 4. Best Practices

Unfortunately there has been little progress on this topic but some of the work will find its way into the IYA 2009 activities and some has been reported in the *Communicating Astronomy Journal*.

### 5. Communicating Astronomy Journal

The new journal for *Communicating Astronomy with the Public*, named CAP Journal, was launched in October 2007. The first issue, a 36-page, glossy production was a great success and this has now been followed up by issues 2 and 3, the last being in May 2008. Editor-in-Chief is Pedro Russo, supported by Lars Lindberg Christensen and Terry Mahoney as Executive Editor and Editor, respectively. The first edition had a broad range of articles and the success was demonstrated by the latest edition, which attracted a much wider range of authors; a trend that we expect to continue. The printing of the first issues of the *Journal* were sponsored by ESA/ST-ECF and can be found at <[www.capjournal.org/](http://www.capjournal.org/)>. New sponsorships for individual issues are sought.

### 6. New Ways of Communicating Astronomy with the Public

As with topic 3, this has taken a bit of a back-seat although the work on preparing for IYA 2009 has meant that the theme has been well and truly taken up with bloggs, webcasts and podcasts all becoming more 'mainstream'. This was also one of the themes for CAP2007 (see below)

### 7. Communicating Astronomy with the Public Conference

The *Communicating Astronomy with the Public* (CAP) conference has now become a brand name of Commission 55, following the highly successful meeting held in ESO-HQ in 2005. CAP2007 was held in Athens, Greece, 7-10 October 2007. This was a huge success with well over 200 participants (the largest CAP meeting so far) from many countries around the world. The focus was on IYA 2009 and it proved to be an extremely successful and useful meeting with lots of cross pollination of ideas from around the world. Athens proved to be a marvelous setting and visits to sites and the conference dinner in the shadow of the Parthenon were jewels to remember.

## 8. International Year of Astronomy

By far the greatest focus and involvement during 2007 and 2008 has been in the preparation and support for the *International Year of Astronomy 2009* (IYA 2009), and this has consumed most of the activity of the key activists. The key members of Commission 55, Ian Robson, Lars Lindberg Christensen and Dennis Crabtree are all members of the IAU Executive Committee Working Group overseeing the Year and the monthly teleconferences have meant that everyone has maintained their noses to the grindstone.

Commission 55 organised the kick-off meeting for the Nations Single Point of Contacts (SPoCs) at the ESO-HQ in Garching, Germany, 3-4 March 2007. This meeting was a tremendous success, with 26 out of the 63 identified SPoCs attending, coming from places as far a field as China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, USA, Canada and Mexico (31 countries represented in total). The webcast of the meetings and the presentations can be found at [www.communicatingastronomy.org/iya\\_eso/programme.html](http://www.communicatingastronomy.org/iya_eso/programme.html). During the Saturday evening, four attendees conducted a web- and skype-cast of the total eclipse of the moon, linking two schools from Germany and South Africa and many other callers freely joining in. Out of this kick-off meeting came a number of ideas and themes that are being taken forward for IYA 2009. One of the key successes was the agreement of the logo and slogan for IYA 2009, and these are now being spread through the communities by web downloads. The number of SPoCs who have managed to set-up their own national node pages is extremely gratifying.

Overall, it is clear that there is a lot of activity going on, but the global economic downturn has hindered the fundraising. Nevertheless, the IYA 2009 secretariat, hosted by ESO, Garching, Germany, is now fully staffed and the web page is proving to be a huge success ([www.astronomy2009.org](http://www.astronomy2009.org)) with an amazing hit-rate. A fabulous trailer (video) has been produced by the secretariat, this and lots of other information can be found on the web. The video can be seen at:

[www.astronomy2009.org/index.php/?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=378](http://www.astronomy2009.org/index.php/?option=com_content&view=article&id=378).

For the future, IYA 2009 again points to the main focus. A session at the JENAM 2008 in Vienna, September 2008, was devoted to the IYA 2009 in terms of education and outreach. Support will also be provided for the IAU XXVII General Assembly in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2009, and it has been agreed that the biennial CAP (2009) will be foregone and instead will be held in the Spring of 2010 in Cape Town. It will be an extended meeting so that the evaluation and legacy aspects of IYA 2009 can be fully appreciated and documented.

### 8.1. News Release - IAU0702: The United Nations declares 2009 the International Year of Astronomy

Dec 20, 2007, Paris

Early this morning (CET) the United Nations (UN) 62nd General Assembly proclaimed 2009 the *International Year of Astronomy*. The Resolution was submitted by Italy, Galileo Galilei's home country. The International Year of Astronomy 2009 is an initiative of the International Astronomical Union and UNESCO.

The *International Year of Astronomy 2009* (IYA 2009) celebrates the first astronomical use of the telescope by Galileo a momentous event that initiated 400 years of astronomical discoveries and triggered a scientific revolution which profoundly affected our world view. Now telescopes on the ground and in space explore the Universe, 24 hours a day, across all wavelengths of light. The President of the International Astronomical Union (IAU)

Catherine Cesarsky says: “The *International Year of Astronomy 2009* gives all nations a chance to participate in this ongoing exciting scientific and technological revolution”.

The IYA 2009 will highlight global cooperation for peaceful purposes - the search for our cosmic origin and our common heritage which connect all citizens of planet Earth. For several millennia, astronomers have worked together across all boundaries including geographic, gender, age, culture and race, in line with the principles of the UN Charter. In that sense, astronomy is a classic example of how science can contribute toward furthering international cooperation.

At the IAU General Assembly on 23 July 2003 in Sydney (Australia), the IAU unanimously approved a resolution in favour of the proclamation of 2009 as the *International Year of Astronomy*. Based on Italy’s initiative, UNESCO’s General Conference at its 33rd session recommended that the UN General Assembly adopt a resolution to declare 2009 the *International Year of Astronomy*. On 20 December 2007 the *International Year of Astronomy 2009* was proclaimed by the United Nations 62nd General Assembly. The UN has designated the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as the lead agency for the IYA 2009. The IAU will function as the facilitating body for IYA 2009.

The IYA 2009 is, first and foremost, an activity for the citizens of planet Earth. It aims to convey the excitement of personal discovery, the pleasure of sharing fundamental knowledge about the Universe and our place in it, and the merits of the scientific method. Astronomy is an invaluable source of inspiration for humankind throughout all nations. So far 99 nations and 14 organisations have signed up to participate in the IYA 2009 – an unprecedented network of committed communicators and educators in astronomy.

For more information on the *International Year of Astronomy 2009* please visit the website at <[www.astronomy2009.org](http://www.astronomy2009.org)>.

– End of Press Release –

## 9. Other

The web now includes two new topics: ‘training’ and a ‘jobs bank’. The former provides links to specific courses on science communications, while the latter relates to positions in the outreach area.

Ian E. Robson, Dennis R. Crabtree & Lars Lindberg Christensen  
*president, vice-president & secretary of the Commission*