

Developing a New National Forum for Science - the Australian Experience

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Abstract:

Just prior to the PCST3 conference in Montreal in 1994, Australian journalists, communicators, scientists and technical writers formed an association to further the cause of science communication within Australia.

The group "Australian Science Communicators" (ASC) has brought together people widely dispersed across the country and from different organisations and backgrounds. They share an interest in the public communication of science and technology, but until the formation of ASC, they were largely isolated from others with the same interests.

This paper describes the progress of ASC, in organising events such as "Science in the Pub", training workshops in science communication, meetings with the national Minister for Science, and for establishing of a large and diverse networking group. ASC was instrumental in uniting national groups interested in science communication (including the Academies of Science and the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies) to organise a new public forum to publicise and critically examine science and technology.

ASC has increased the Australian presence internationally, and was a prime mover in an Australian offer to host PCST4 in Melbourne. ASC has been able to assist in the formation of a counterpart organisation in South Africa.

Is there anything ASC cannot do?

The formation of ASC

The population of Australia is small and widely dispersed, with 19 million people living in an area of nearly 8 million square kilometres. These distances had helped defeat an earlier attempt (in the mid-1980s) to create an organisation linking people with an interest in the public communication of science and technology.

In 1993 Jenni Metcalfe won a CSIRO Travelling scholarship which took her to the US and Ireland. In Ireland she presented a paper to a PCST workshop and was asked to present a plenary paper to PCST3 in Montreal in 1994. The paper was an overview of PCST activities in Australia, a list of organisations active in PCST with a summary of what they were doing; and she enlisted Toss Gascoigne as a joint author.

The authors gathered information from a number of widely dispersed sources, including science museums, Federal Government departments, universities, the fledgling Cooperative Research Centres, Australia's national research organisation (the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation), and media. A feature of the interviews and surveys was a common complaint of professional isolation, and wistful hopes for an organisation to link science communicators.

In January 1994, Gascoigne circulated a memo to 23 leading figures in science communication in Australia. They included people from CSIRO, media, the universities, museums and science centres, Government departments, research organisations, and lobby groups and peak councils representing science and technology interests. All 23 were invited to attend a meeting at the National Press Club in Canberra on 3 February 1994 to consider establishing a new body.

The purpose of the meeting was to identify the aims and benefits of this notional organisation; to establish who the members should be; and if broad agreement could be reached on these matters, to elect an interim committee to carry the decisions of the meeting forward. It was chaired by Alison Leigh, then Executive Producer of the science television program Quantum.

The meeting considered a five-point outline prepared by Julian Cribb (then science writer for *The Australian* newspaper) under the headings objectives, name, membership, structure and activities; and broadly accepted this outline. It was proposed that the new organisation should emphasise the public communication of S&T. After some debate it was also accepted that ASC should be open to any interested people rather than limit membership to a more narrowly-based group interested in accreditation and ethics. Julian Cribb was elected President of a six-person interim committee, and asked to prepare for an inaugural AGM at the meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) in Geelong on 22 September 1994.

The interim committee publicised the embryonic organisation vigorously, and invited those interested to become foundation members for a contribution of \$25. 375 people paid their \$25, and these funds were boosted by donations of \$5350 from research organisations, peak councils and a Government department. By the end of August, the interim Treasurer was able to report income of \$13,091 and expenditure of \$1769.

Fifty-five people attended the inaugural AGM. The draft constitution was amended and accepted; Julian Cribb was elected unopposed as inaugural President; and nine people nominated for six places on the committee. A free-ranging discussion on possible activities included endorsement of a bid to host PCST 4 in Melbourne, running lunchtime forums to assist scientific societies to publicise their work, and on-going training for journalists reporting science. ASC carried out its first public function: the presentation of the inaugural "Unsung Hero of Australian Science" to Dr Caroline Mountford by the Minister for Industry, Science and Technology Senator Peter Cook.

The Australian Science Communicators was born.

The achievements of ASC

The major achievement of ASC has been to create a network and a community where none existed before. Individuals isolated within their organisation or their one-person consultancies have discovered colleagues, common interests, meetings of like-minded people, an email network which carries jobs, announcements, and vigorously-expressed points of view.

ASC has elected its fifth President, all of whom have been the most prominent figures in science media. It has established eight regional groups in the major population centres, and these groups have run activities ranging from private tours of science organisations to media training sessions for members. ASC has a newsletter and an email network linking 260 people; and has presented the "Unsung Hero" Award five times.

ASC also has a national presence. It acted as the catalyst for a new national forum on S&T and has persuaded the Presidents of the Academies of Science, ANZAAS, the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS) and the National Press Club to form the Science Forum. This group brings all the major S&T groups in Australia together to organise PCST activities; and although in its infancy, has the potential to be highly influential. ASC has put proposals to the Minister for Science in personal meetings: and without ASC it would have been difficult to organise funding for National Science Week.

A random sampling of Members nominated the following when asked: "What has ASC done for you?"

- provided leadership and coordinated major annual events that have helped to popularise science
- Networking, Networking, and (so that I don't say networking a third time) raising awareness of science issues
- made me feel part of a profession rather than just someone with a fruit salad of a career.
- providing my organisation with opportunities for training in communications
- broadened my understanding of what is science communication
- provided me with ideas I can adopt in my own working environment and career.
- given me many ideas on what we could do to promote science [in South Africa]
- the listserver [email discussion list] is quite useful - for views and for information
- I have felt a little closer to Australian science through ASC
- helped me plan media strategies for conferences
- interesting discussions/jobs on ASC-list
- science communication conference in Melbourne [PCST4}
- organised Science in the Pub -- I know this is Sydney-centric but it's great - a social forum in which to hear good speakers
- meeting some interesting people and helping me to keep abreast with issues - and having some fun with Science in the Pub
- given me access to a network that can provide information, work; and to whom I can pass on information and work
- brought together people from different disciplines who nevertheless have mutual aims

Is there anything ASC cannot do?

ASC members are its sternest critics. Certainly the organisation has not been without its faults - before a recent change, the Secretariat was weak and disorganised; and regional branches fluctuated from great bursts of activity to silence. Members of the Committee have found it difficult to cope with the competing demands of proper jobs and running ASC; and for an organisation supposedly devoted to communication, communication from the Committee to ASC members has at times been woeful. ASC suffers all the problems of organisations run by volunteers. There has been some dissension in the ranks, especially when ANZAAS started to crumble and then collapsed after 109 years of leading the public discussion of science in Australia and New Zealand.

The same random sample of Members nominated the following when asked: "What other things should ASC be doing?"

- Negotiate with key science institutes, societies and associations and R&D organisations to jointly run forums
- Establish some credibility in running its own affairs professionally
- Sponsoring members to travel
- Encourage more practising science journalists to be active in the ASC
- Promote more debate on science communication issues - get the email network more active for a start.
- Provide opportunities for high-profile professional communicators to visit the regions which will encourage more active participation in the science communication field.
- Link in with other professional organisations and provide more for members
- ASC has done a lot of good things institutionally but has forgotten to cater to rank and file members. We have very little member services
- I worry about some of the internal communication, in that I don't really get much solid information about our directions (except for bickering on the email)
- Encouraging science awareness in media/politics, actively discouraging anti-science trends and discussions

- The occasional science communication workshop for science communicators (rather than scientists) might be good -- targeted on specific things like "writing a feature" or "organising/chairing a panel discussion"
- I'd like it if the ASC list kept me up to date on science policy stuff
- Encouraging members (more strongly and determinedly) to develop ideas (initiatives) that help communicate science
- Plugging away at overcoming sensationalist science journalism.
- Concern itself more with the nuts and bolts of scientific communication
- Be seen as the source of excellence/authority/information in the area of scientific communication
- Should be more aware that not all science communication occurs via the media - a great deal goes on in education
- the policy/political function of ASC

ASC: the first four years in retrospect

Even if ASC folded tomorrow under the weight of inertia and criticism, its influence would linger for years. So many informal relationships have sprung up as a result of people meeting each through ASC that PCST activities would continue even if there were no central body to coordinate activities, albeit loosely.

The weaknesses will probably continue in ASC, although it has recently made some sensible decisions to regularise its activities. These include hiring a well-organised private consultant to maintain its membership database and keep its records; and establishing a more professional basis for the preparation of its newsletter. ASC will ebb and flow; and continue to rely heavily on the imagination and work of individuals.

It will have its raging successes (like *Science in the Pub*, and the *Fresh Science* sessions at the new-look national science forum in May this year), as well as its moments of temporary inactivity.

A measure of the impetus it has given PCST is that Australian to this meeting (PCST5) in Berlin form the second largest national group, behind only our hosts. There are more Australians giving papers, chairing sessions and on the organising committee of the PCST Network than any other nationality. The vigour of science communication in Australia owes a lot to the existence of ASC.

Perhaps most promising is that people in Australia care about ASC. When a recent AGM considered a proposal to investigate merging with the troubled ANZAAS organisation, the howls of protest were long, loud and nearly unanimous. When a young organisation inspires loyalty like this, it must be doing something right.