

COMMUNICATING ASTRONOMY IN EUROPE: Strategies and Challenges in International Organisations

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How much do Europeans really know about science and technology? What do they think about it? For more than a decade, the European Union (EU) has carried out regular surveys to measure public opinion and knowledge on a variety of themes across its member states. One survey carried out in early 2005 is of particular interest to science communication – “Europeans, Science and Technology”. It’s easy to see that science and technology are racing along faster than ever and you would think that people’s knowledge and interest of science and technology would be keeping pace. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Over the past few years, Europeans’ overall interest in science and technology has decreased.

Astronomy plays a special role within public science communication. It serves as a general science “catcher”, not only for young people. Astronomy embraces core sciences such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and geology as well as technical disciplines including optics, observational techniques and data analysis. Astronomy reaches wide into the realm of philosophy; it rubs shoulders with religion and is at the core of many science fiction stories. In short, astronomy attracts a wide spectrum of people and may serve as a powerful vehicle for improving the public awareness and understanding of science.

Several key International Organisations like the European Space Agency (ESA), the European Southern Observatory (ESO), Europlanet and the International Astronomical Union (IAU) work in Astronomy and Space Sciences in Europe. As well as a

general overview of the outreach and communication actions of some of these Organisations, focus will be made in specific cases and examples in the context of these organisations. 2009 will be the International Year of Astronomy. It will be interesting to see how these European Organisations are getting ready for this ultimate science communication challenge.