

How do you make a rockstar scientist? It takes more than a multimillion-dollar prize

November 18 2015, by Laura Kormos



Credit: Laura de Mingo, CC BY-NC

Some of the world's most successful businessmen think scientists are [equal to rockstars](#) and deserve to be treated – and paid – like them. That's the aim of the Breakthrough Prizes, created by Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Russian entrepreneur Yuri Milner to reward scientists for groundbreaking work in a variety of fields.

As one of the recipients of the US\$3m [2016 Breakthrough Prize in](#)

[Fundamental Physics](#) (shared with around 400 of my fellow scientists), I found it very exciting to win such a [prestigious award](#). But does it mean that I, or any scientist, should or could achieve rockstar status?

Firstly I should point out that, if anyone does, it's not likely to be me, in part because I haven't done anything that would merit such an elevated status. But even for those with greater responsibility for the biggest advances in science, the large, international, collaborative nature of today's [particle physics](#) research perhaps makes it less likely that any individual will achieve such public recognition.

Our prize was awarded for the "fundamental discovery of neutrino oscillations, revealing a new frontier beyond, and possibly far beyond, the standard model of particle physics". This mouthful of a sentence perhaps reveals the first problem with my nascent dreams of rockstardom. My would-be fans will say: "How cool! You got a prize for ... ummm." It takes a loyal fan to stick with their idol when it's a struggle to understand what they've done that's so special in the first place.

Possibly the most obvious candidate for rockstar scientist is the physics professor and TV presenter [Brian Cox](#), who is not only eloquent and engaging but also came with a ready-made platform due to his previous life as an actual rockstar. The astronomer and hugely popular writer and presenter Carl Sagan, on the other hand, started from a significant disadvantage in that he had to create his own platform. He was powered by the passionate belief that the eyes of the general public must be opened to the beauty of science, and supported by a media that believed that the public is intelligent.

Perhaps, then, the first of the criteria for becoming a rockstar scientist is the ability to communicate the excitement and glory of their achievements. They also need a platform from which to do this, whether

it's a popular book, TV show or YouTube series.

The problem is that the likes of Cox and Sagan are the exceptions. Scientists are usually not the most adept people at conveying the sheer thrill of their successes to the general public. And even those who are strong communicators don't usually reach rockstar status. Many of us have done our bit of outreach yet various things conspire to keep our rockstardom dreams unfulfilled.

Some people have the ability to explain things very clearly, but they lack the ability to grasp and hold people's attention. They lack charisma. Others can capture people's attention and imagination but find that being a scientist is a full-time job. They choose it over and over again rather than taking time to work towards science stardom.



Brian Cox has quite the fan base. Credit: duncan/flickr

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