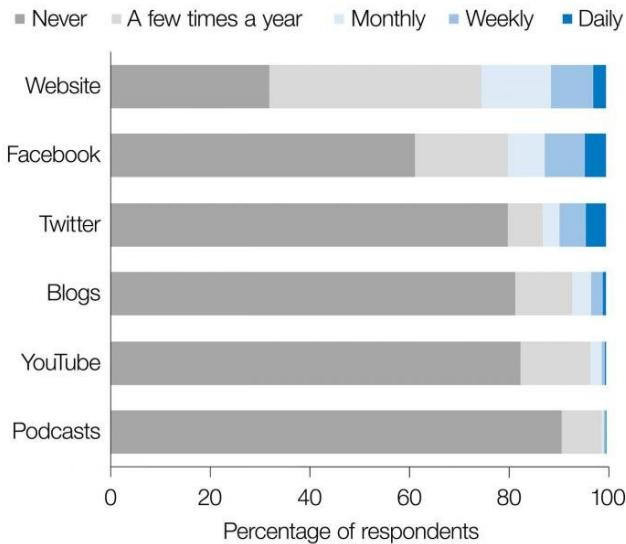


A study of almost 2600 IAU members shows that astronomers have a remarkable drive for public engagement

30 November 2018



This figure shows the frequency of participation in online media channels by IAU astronomers. The percentages of respondents who use each channel at each indicated level of frequency are shown. Credit: *Nature*/M. Entradas (LSE, ISCTE-IUL)

Because of the ubiquitous nature of its questions and the stunning insights into the nature of the Universe, astronomy has often been thought of as appealing and the natural science with the most far-reaching popularisation efforts. A recently published study of the outreach activities of IAU members, *Bustling public communication by astronomers around the world driven by personal and contextual factors*, has shown that professional astronomers may be engaging with the public more than scientists in any other field.

The study, which was conducted by surveying a record-breaking 2587 professional astronomers of the IAU in early 2016, found that as many as 87%

participated in scientific outreach activities, both by taking part in events and engaging with representatives of the media. Those astronomers who participated in outreach activities reported an average of 18 activities in the preceding year.

The leader of the study, Marta Entradas (London School of Economics and Political Science & ISCTE-IUL) explains: "What surprised me most about this study was the high activity found among astronomers working in less developed regions, which in some cases may exceed the activity of those working in Europe or in the US."

The vast majority of astronomers prefer to interact with the public in traditional ways, through lectures and school talks, and fewer than 20% use social media and digital platforms for outreach activities. Most engagements with news reporters are conducted by senior astronomers, while junior scientists prefer face-to-face interactions, and they are motivated?—?above all else?—?intrinsicly. "We have a passion for our science and we feel it is our duty to share it widely," explains Teresa Lago, the IAU General Secretary. "We feel privileged to work in [astronomy](#) and want to share the excitement as our knowledge of the Universe unfolds."

Despite Europe and North America having larger communities and older traditions of astronomical research and public engagement, as well as the easier access to funding, the most active publicly communicating astronomers come from South America and Africa, the homes of many outstanding telescopes. Their efforts have been thoughtfully supported by the IAU Office for Astronomy Development, which awards funding to socially aware projects for the [public communication](#) of astronomy.

The outreach activities in which IAU astronomers

participate tend to be self-organised. Despite 86% of astronomers being in contact with communication experts at their institutions, only 43% of those decide to use the available outreach structures, the rest preferring instead to organise their own activities.

Marta Entradas concludes: "Even though a large number of IAU astronomers do not receive (or look for) any outreach training or funding, their impact on the popularisation of astronomy is immense and does not depend on external factors such as their gender, potential rewards or fear of peer criticism?—?all that matters is intrinsic: their love of astronomy. I believe that other sciences can learn something from this community."

More information: Marta Entradas et al, Bustling public communication by astronomers around the world driven by personal and contextual factors, *Nature Astronomy* (2018). DOI: [10.1038/s41550-018-0633-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41550-018-0633-7)

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