

London Scholarly Summit Keynote:

## Reports from the Front Line of Research Communication

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### Communicating your Research

So, I said to you at the beginning, this is the golden age of research communication. Suddenly you have tools available to you and opportunities available to you, that have never existed for researchers before. And, for the very first time, you can take responsibility for the way that your research, the research you care about, the research you curate, is communicated, who it's communicated to, what the outcomes of all of that is. You don't have to wait for your university to give you permission, it would be, kind of, nice if they gave you help, but we'll come onto that. You don't have to wait for your funders to give you permission, you don't have to wait for somebody to come to you and say, would you like to do this. You don't even have to wait for Taylor and Francis to give you permission or opportunity, you can do research communication straight away.

### What can we do?

You could make a podcast. Do any of you make podcasts? So, again, it's a thing that costs nothing to get going, and can have huge impact. People who listen to your podcasts won't interact with you in any other way, they won't have any other opportunity to hear what you're doing, what you know, hear what you care about.

You could put on dates and talks for interested people. This was an event put on by the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience at UCL a few weeks ago on a Saturday morning, and I assumed no sane person gets up early on a Saturday morning to go and see scientists do talks, other than other scientists of course. Not at all, they had an entire room of people who don't work in academia and don't work in medicine.

You could do collaborations with organisations who work with young people. I've been helping researchers come up with projects to do with adventure playgrounds, because adventure playgrounds work with young people who don't get involved in research communication in any other way, people who don't go on big lab trips, or anything like that.

You could work with school groups. The UK has an amazing infrastructure of helping you work with schools, all the way from STEM Ambassadors. If you work in STEM you should absolutely sign up to be a STEM Ambassador. If you don't want to, you should encourage everybody in your group who has a bit more time than you to do it. STEM Ambassadors is a scheme where they can just be sent opportunities to engage with school groups, and they don't have to chase them down, the opportunities come to them and they say, yes, or, no, it's an amazing scheme.

You can put on interactive workshops for members of the public. You could collaborate with a

museum, every museum has a board who is saying to them, “why don’t we collaborate with researchers more?”. If they’re an Arts Council funded museum, they have, in their funding, that they have to work more closely with researchers and research organisations. Museums are queueing up to work with people like you.

You could take part in competitions. This is Alex Lathbridge from earlier, winning FameLab, the UK’s biggest talking about science on stage competition.

You could start reading groups, I’ve known academics to set up little reading groups around the fiction that they work on. If you don’t think members of the public are sufficiently engaged with early 20th Century Scandinavian Crime Fiction, set up an early 20th Century Scandinavian Crime Fiction reading group.

There’s a whole load of other things you can do, that I don’t have great pictures for, so they all go on one slide. I’m hoping you will get these slides later, so that you can have a look at them. But, my point is that, there’s so many opportunities all over the UK, to get involved in sharing your research more widely than academia.

And, you might think to yourself, Steve, I only care about sharing research in academia, that is my thing. But, one of the things that I would say to you is, from seven and a half years working at UCL, the only time academics who I wasn’t working with ever found out about my work, it was through seeing it in *The Guardian* or because their partner went to a gig, or because their kids wanted to perform with me. It was never because they saw it in an official academic thing. All the academics you want to connect with, are out there absorbing all this research communication, as well.

### Who Are You Engaging With?

The other question I always want to ask is, who are you engaging with?

I think we’ve become really good at collecting numbers, 2,000 people listen to my podcast, but we’re not very good at knowing who those people are. And, you can’t really be clear the change you’re making, unless you understand who you are engaging with. So, I will always ask you to think about the age and the demographics and the location, what is the interest that is driving people to take your communications, to take your engagement and be part of it.

If we don’t do this, we hit this problem. So, this is a chart from a piece of research called Public Attitudes to Science, it’s done by Ipsos MORI every three or four years, and it’s a gold standard survey of the UK public and how they connect with science. One of the things I wanted to draw your attention to, because everyone always says as we see them, we don’t have to do all this. You know, I make my research publicly available, it’s in an open access server, and I do a public lecture, to which anyone can come, I’m doing my research communication, that’s fine.

However, we know that less than 1% of the UK population attends a public lecture each year, which is, once you take into account how many of them are professional scientists and have to do this sort of thing, is vanishingly small. Even science festivals barely do better, 3% of the UK population go every year.

### So, What Should We Do?

So, what that means is, you've got to think about, for the audience you want to connect with, what do they actually do, what do they go to. I mean, for instance, 40% of them are going to nature reserves every year, so you'd be much, much, much better thinking about how you work with a nature reserve, than how you do a public lecture.

So, I always end with some practical advice. The first bit of practical advice I have is, you have professional help available to you, you know I said, don't wait for permission, that's true, but also, don't hold yourself away from the help that is available. If you're within a university, your university has a comms team, has a media relations team, it probably has a public engagement team, as well, if it's one of the bigger, kind of, higher research power universities. They are there to help you, they are there for you to go, I want to have a bigger impact outside academia, what can I do.

The other thing is use the informal help that's available to you. In cities across the UK now, there are informal support networks for researchers who want to communicate. In London we do a science one called the London SciComm Socials – I'm one of the founders of it. We meet in the pub once a month, we go for a walk every couple of months, we have an annual symposium that costs £10 to come to and we give the £10 to charity, we only charge it to make you turn up. And, that's an informal group of people who love communicating research and want to help you. You can access that, even if your employer isn't that helpful, there's a bunch of other people that are.

The third one is, if you want to work with a new audience, don't sit and think, I don't know any way to communicate with this group of people, who would be important to my research, I'm stuck, go and talk to people who do work with that group already.

As a simple example, I do a show every two months at the Bishopsgate Institute. Bishopsgate Institute says, we don't think we get enough people between the ages of 20 and 50 coming to our venue and hearing about the things that we collect. So, they collect in the areas of London history, women's history, LGBT+ history, and the history of activism and protest. So, now, I do a monthly show with them, because I have a huge audience of 20 to 50 year olds who want to come to shows that I put on, and we collaborate together. They get the audience type they want, I get to work in a really cool and exciting venue.

The other thing is, now is the time when you can build your own product. If you look at all the research communication things that are out there, and you think, none of this works for my

research, or for the audience I want to work with, it's simple to build your own thing.

The other thing I really, really want to hammer out, is be led by your audience's needs. This is the Festival of Communities at Queen Mary University London, which is a university really pushing at the edges of public engagement and communication, they're really going beyond what anyone has done before. The Festival of Communities doesn't happen on campus, because most people who live in East London will not walk onto the Queen Mary University London campus, most people who live in the UK will not walk onto a university campus. There is a threshold, we can't see it because we work with them, but most people won't pass it. So, they do this in the park down the road, where people take their kids all the time. Wildly, wildly successful, has local people who have never heard of the university realising it's one of the most influential and helpful organisations around. It's the opposite of this. It's building the thing that works for the people you want to connect with, not building the thing that is easiest to build for you and hoping that someone comes along.

The other thing I wanted to say is, now is the time where you can do research communication that no one has ever done before. We're in an environment where you're allowed to experiment, and people are doing all sorts of things, so now is your time to take control of how the research you care about is communicated. Thank you very much indeed.