

*2010: Celebrating 25 years of science advocacy in Australia*

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## Submission

### Submission to Expert Working group on Science & the Media

**6 September 2010**

The expert working group on Science and the Media has been tasked with the formulation of recommendations regarding opportunities to improve engagement of Australian media and therefore citizens, with science.

FASTS acknowledges the importance of developing a national strategy aimed at improving science communication and is supportive of the recommendations contained within the *Inspiring Australia – a National Strategy for Engagement with the Sciences* Report.

In the context of the *Inspiring Australia* Report, this submission provides some practical ways to improve engagement of the Australian media and community with science.

FASTS is Australia's peak body in science and technology, and welcomes the opportunity to make the following recommendations:

**Recommendation one:**

FASTS recommends the development of a competitive grants program aimed at encouraging local governments to engage local scientists, their communities and the media.

While a national framework can provide leadership, widespread success will come when this translates to grass roots action. Engaging every local government is one way of achieving this.

The program could be administered by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research in collaboration with the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government.

Broad program structure:

Local Governments or Local Government Areas (LGAs) would be provided with grant money, on a competitive basis, in order to deliver activities that engage local scientists and their communities. Most, if not all, local government areas have one or more university, research facility, publicly funded research agency or industry that employs scientists. These scientists could be engaged in community activities that aim to:

- Instill the wonderment of science in the community, especially school children;
- Improve the science literacy of children and/or adults;

- Showcase how science is part of everyday life; and/or
- Showcase the importance of science to business/industry.

As a condition of funding, LGAs would be required to:

- Engage local scientists;
- Outline the media strategy they will implement to attract media interest in the proposed activity. This should include use of new media/social networking;
- Facilitate the provision of media training to the participating scientists. Access to a pool of media trainers could be made available by the federal government agency administering the program.

Funding preference could be given to:

- Ongoing activities, rather than one-off activities;
- Those that involve schools.

Incentives/rewards could be provided based on the level of media impact and level of community involvement.

Outcomes:

- More communities and schools exposed to science (therefore growing science literacy);
- More scientists receive media training;
- More scientists talk publically about their work;
- More journalists report on science;
- More scientists and LGAs embrace new media opportunities;
- Greater recognition of the importance of science to industry, its importance to everyday life (thereby breaking the stereotype that science means geeks in white lab coats).

A review of the program could allow the most successful projects to be identified and rolled out nationally.

**Recommendation two:**

That FASTS, or a similar centrally placed organisation, be engaged to coordinate greater use of new media.

Already, many science journalists, organisations, publishers and other science professionals use new media effectively. Via twitter and Facebook, access to articles published on science programs produced in Australia and abroad are staring us in the face. One needn't search the internet for access to the latest science article in the New York Times, it can be delivered direct to your phone and it can capture your imagination in 140 characters or less.

Many mainstream media networks and science organisations such as CSIRO, the RI Australia and RI Britain all have Facebook pages. Links to presentations delivered at scientific conferences across the globe regularly appear on Twitter and readers' views about such presentations are often shared leading to networks, exchanges and collaborations not otherwise possible.

FASTS, or a similar centrally placed organisation, could be resourced to coordinate greater use of new media and assist more science professionals and organisations share their information across such networks. This could be achieved through the development of an

online portal or central webpoint. Through this mechanism scientists and scientific organisations could access existing social media networks effortlessly, as well as learn how their own organisation can communicate effectively through such means. For example, FASTS could assist hundreds of scientific societies and their members engage with new media.

Outcomes:

- Greater use and easier access to science content in new media;
- Greater dissemination of information;
- Greater sharing of ideas;
- Stronger network and more collaboration.

**Recommendation three:**

Science communication training, including different levels of media training should be mandatory for scientists employed in publically funded research organisations, as a condition of funding. Additional financial resources must be provided to enable this activity.

Established scientific societies could also be resourced to provide communication training to their members. Broadly speaking scientific societies are structured and operated in such a way as to provide professional development opportunities to their members. Often the focus is on teaching proficiency in scientific techniques but this could be extended to science communication training.

Scientific societies also run annual scientific conferences. All conference organisers should engage science communication experts to ensure media opportunities are exploited.

Outcomes:

- Improve science communication amongst scientists;
- Make science communication just “part of the job” and thereby turn around issues that are a result of poor science communication in one generation of scientists;
- Increase the media’s access to science content and spokespeople.

**Recommendation four:**

A small dose of science everyday could be provided via the nightly weather report. Daily reporting of the weather provides an ideal opportunity to talk about science in a very practical way. One minute of the weather report could outline how science is leading to behavioural change to respond to a changing climate. For example, a new farming practice or a new business model that shows how people and industries are adapting to climate change. The story needn’t be about science but the message should be that the story wouldn’t be possible without science.

As an alternative, consideration should be given to a nightly science report in the same way that there is a regular stock market/financials report in the nightly news. Similar segments could exist on programs like Sunrise and the Today show. In terms of print media, a 100 word or less boxed science spot could be included in the daily press.

Outcomes:

- Increase awareness and science literacy;
- Science would be valued more by communities and individuals;
- Increase understanding of important issues that have a scientific basis, such as climate change;

- Inspire action to be taken by individuals or other organisations.

**Recommendation five:**

There is no shortage of people willing to champion the science cause. These include Nobel Prize and other science prize-winners, eminent scientists; prominent advocates; and of course the quiet achievers, as well as post-graduate students filled with enthusiasm. Each do their bit to promote the importance of science but the impact of individual efforts could be enhanced and more widespread if the work of such 'Science Ambassadors' was coordinated. This would require a coordinating body, which could be a Federal Government agency. Communication training for Ambassadors should also be available if needed.

Coordination would ensure Science Ambassadors are regularly visiting schools, speaking with media, accessing decision makers, exposing industries that use science everyday. Involving postgraduate students would expose school students to scientists closer to their age. The program would need to be designed so that postgraduate students are not disadvantaged or penalised for taking a short period of time away from their studies.

**Outcomes:**

- Increase awareness of the value and benefits of science;
- Add some celebrity status to science advocacy;
- Inspire the teaching and learning of science.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to submit recommendations to the Expert Working Group on Science and the Media. I am available to further discuss FASTS submission with you.



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**Anna-Maria Arabia**

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