

Communicating and Networking by Astronomy Librarians

Marlene Cummins

*Astronomy and Astrophysics Library, University of Toronto, Toronto,
ON, Canada*
library@astro.utoronto.ca

Uta Grothkopf

European Southern Observatory, Library, Garching, Germany
esolib@eso.org

Abstract. Librarians in other disciplines have often marveled at the effective networking that takes place among astronomy librarians.

How do we do it? In January 2001, an international survey was undertaken to assess problems, successes and trends around the world. We summarize the results as described in our publication “Communicating and Networking in Astronomy Libraries” (Grothkopf & Cummins 2001).

1. Introduction

In January 2001, a survey was conducted to find out how and how often astronomy librarians communicate with their colleagues, with library users and publishers. In particular, barriers to effective communication were looked at. The survey was done completely by email and circulated through mailing lists (Astrolib, PAMnet and PAM-APF). We received a total of 69 responses from 24 countries; with the exception of the USA (33 replies), 1-4 responses came from each country.

2. Staying Informed is Essential

An important part of the librarian’s mission is to keep their users informed about suitable information resources. By nature, this requires that the librarian herself be well-informed about what is available and what potential value lies in a resource. In our rapidly growing world of information resources, one person alone will not succeed in obtaining knowledge of all available products, all services that may be needed by our users, or on the entire range of options we can offer. Communication among fellow librarians therefore is critical in carrying out librarians’ professional duties. Personal communication with colleagues, participating in mailing lists, attending conferences and other continuing education events, and discussing issues with library users as well as with publishers and vendors are all important activities for staying informed about latest developments.

3. Direct Communication

The most obvious method of interaction is direct communication between two or a few colleagues; 31% of the survey respondents stated that they communicate daily or several times per week with other astronomy librarians, 40% a few times per month, 23% a few times per year, 6% never. In addition, astronomy librarians are also in contact with non-astronomy librarians: 33.5% contact them daily or several times per week, 26% a few times per month, 33.5% a few times per year, 7% never (Fig. 1 and 2).

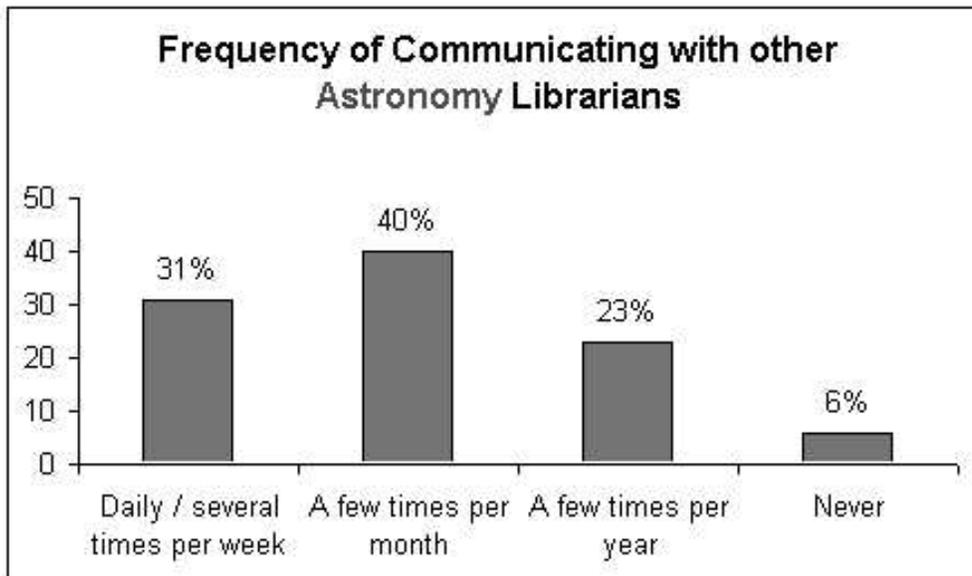


Figure 1. Communicating with Other Astronomy Librarians.

4. LISA Conferences

As observatories are often geographically isolated, it is difficult for our professional group to meet in person, and these rare events are therefore highly valued. For astronomy librarians, LISA conferences are important opportunities to get to know colleagues. Two questions in our survey focused on the LISA conferences and their respective benefits. Of the respondents, 49% had attended at least one of the three conferences; more specifically, 17% attended LISA I in 1988, 30% LISA II in 1995, and 36% LISA III in 1998. Almost 67% ranked enhanced future communications after meeting colleagues as the number one positive outcome.

On the other hand, the problems associated with conference attendance are obvious – expenses are high (registration fee, travel costs, accommodation etc.), and attendance approval requires a lot of support from the authorities in our institutes who decide on funds allocation. Fortunately, LISA conferences seem

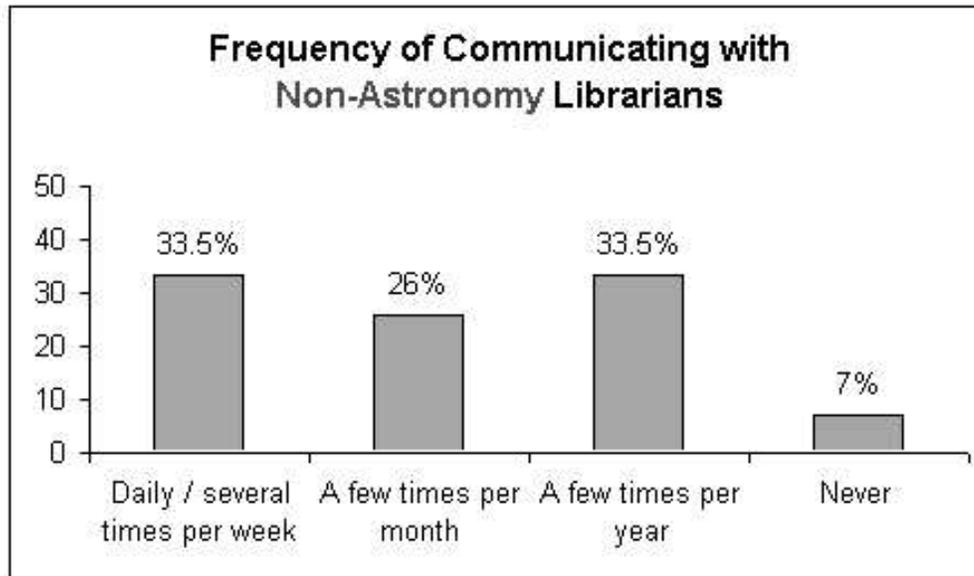


Figure 2. Communicating with Non-Astronomy Librarians.

to be increasingly recognized by astronomers and observatory directors which may improve chances for even increased future attendance.

Main Benefits of LISA Conferences:

- enhanced future communications after meeting colleagues
- mix of participants (librarians, astronomers, computer scientists, publishers...) leads to better understanding of the other groups
- learning about new astronomy products and library management techniques sooner and more effectively than otherwise possible
- realization that effective communication among librarians can make more information sources available for astronomers
- confirmation of strong sense of cooperation and solidarity among astronomy librarians
- increased self-esteem and pride in belonging to this professional group

5. Communicating with Library Users

Communicating with library users is an essential part of the librarian's work. The main purposes are communicating library services and products to our users, providing requested information and assessing users' needs. In times of increasing numbers of information resources and decreasing funds, it is more important than ever to know library users' needs as this is a prerequisite to providing good service.

Of the survey respondents, 48% stated that email is most frequently used to communicate with library users, email being closely followed by face-to-face communication (42%). Regarding email interaction, a remarkable difference can

be seen between groups of countries - while 57% of librarians from developed countries communicate most frequently by email with their users, this is only the case for 40% of librarians from developing countries. Quite interestingly, however, only 29% of the respondents of our survey regard email conversation as the most effective method of communicating, while the large number of 60% consider personal face-to-face interactions most effective (Fig. 3).

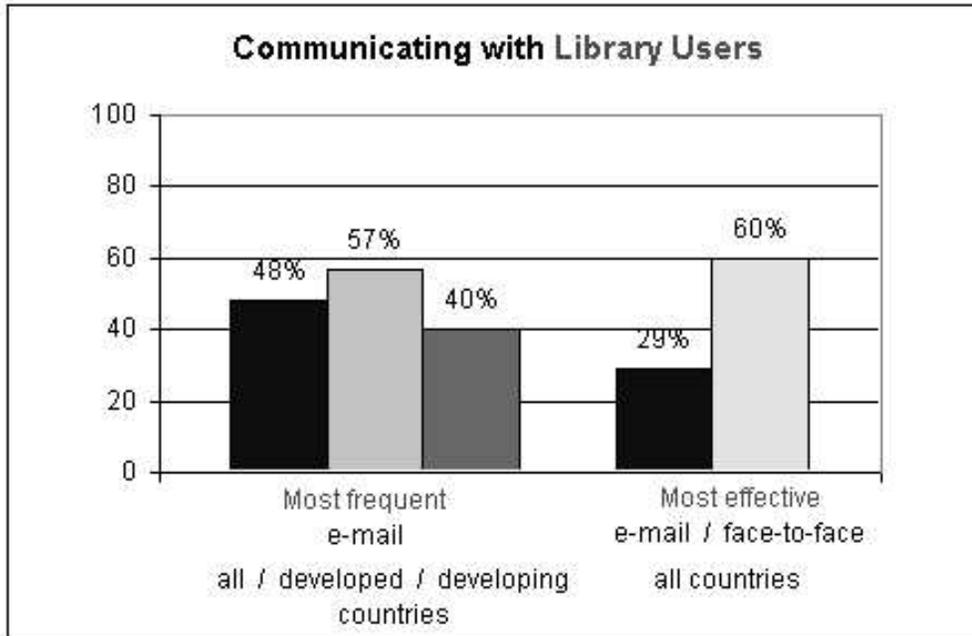


Figure 3. Communicating with Library Users.

In addition to individual personal communication with users, there are also other means to assess user needs and provide service, for instance web pages, interactive "Ask A" services, library committees, user questionnaires and surveys. Whatever method is applied, it will lead to initiating or adjusting services to better meet users' needs. After some time, it is essential to evaluate the success (or failure) of the changes.

6. Barriers to Effective Communication

Some traditional barriers, most importantly the distance between librarians or between librarians and their users, have become significantly less important. However, many barriers to easy, effective communication remain, as stated by survey participants.

There is also the issue of awareness of barriers. Some librarians responded that there were "no barriers" yet they had not attended any LISA conferences. Why not - surely those librarians had something to learn or gain by attending! Perhaps time and money constraints are so much a part of a librarian's enviro-

onment that they are taken for granted. Not knowing what you are missing is surely an insidious barrier.

References

- Grothkopf, U. & Cummins, M. 2001, in *Organizations and Strategies in Astronomy II*, ed. A. Heck (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publ.), 207, (<http://www.eso.org/libraries/communicating/>)