

Lights, Camera, Astronomers!

Media training at ESO Chile

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Communicating astronomy with the public is an important part of ESO's mission. The Office for Outreach plays a leading role in this endeavour, bringing many exciting discoveries in frontline research to a worldwide audience. ESO astronomers are also a key component of this collective effort: they are the faces behind the discoveries, and often eloquent spokespersons for astronomy.

Almost every week, a wide range of journalists visit ESO sites in Chile to produce stories that inform the public in Europe and beyond, reaching millions of people through television, film documentaries, written media and the internet. Naturally, many of these stories feature ESO staff in action.

Yet most astronomers have had little or no training on how to communicate effectively with the public through the media. Consequently, many are uncomfortable giving interviews, or talk in a way that is difficult for non-scientists to understand.

To help ESO Chile astronomers become better science communicators, the Office for Outreach in Chile and the Office for Science in Chile have organised several media training workshops for staff astronomers and fellows in Santiago. These day-long workshops, which are voluntary, were led by Marie Claire Dablé, a journalist from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and director of a local multi-media company, and the prize-winning television reporter Valeria Fonca from Chile's TVN, as well as ESO Chile's public outreach team. Nicolas Luco, science editor of *El Mercurio*, Chile's largest newspaper, also joined the participants for lunch to provide insights into what makes a good science story.

The training workshops begin with a short introduction to the media, presenting practical tips on how to handle interviews, followed by a look at some real examples of astronomers interacting with journalists, extracted from recent news reports and documentaries. There is a strong emphasis on television, given the popularity of this medium. According to

Photo: G. Argandoña, ESO



Figure 1. ESO Chile Fellow Ezequiel Treister (centre), is interviewed by Chilean journalists Valeria Fonca (left) and Marie Claire Dablé (right) as part of the media training workshop held at ESO offices in Santiago.

the special Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2007, the most trusted source of information on scientific research for citizens in the European Union is still television (68%), followed by newspapers (41%), radio (26%) and internet (23%).

The second part of the workshop is entirely practical. Astronomers put themselves in front of the camera and under the lights to practise a series of basic interview skills: strategies to stay focused on their main message; bridging techniques to come back to their 'comfort zone'; the avoidance of jargon; and the use of analogies and metaphors to connect with the audience (see Figure 1). These interviews are filmed and reviewed afterwards by the participants, which allows for rich group discussion.

ESO Chile astronomers and fellows who participated in the media training workshops (see the *Astronomical News* section page, upper image) offered to date have been unanimous in their opinion that it was a very informative and fun experience. As one staff astronomer said after completing the workshop: "That was fantastic! I learned a lot and feel more confident dealing with journalists."

The response from ESO Chile astronomers has been so enthusiastic that additional workshops are being organised for those who were unable to take part in the first sessions. More advanced media training will also be offered in the future, touching on such topics as non-verbal communication, how to deal with anxiety when speaking in public, and strategies for effective presentations.

"It is the responsibility of every practising astronomer to play some role in explaining the interest and value of science to our real employers, the taxpayers of the world."

IAU Division XII, Commission 55 on
"Communicating Astronomy with the Public"