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O51 - How (not) to communicate astrobiology

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Are we alone in the universe? To answer this fundamental question of humankind, the search for life (as we know it) beyond Earth has long been both an attraction and a challenge, not only for researchers directly involved but also for many others. In fact, discovering life beyond Earth will be a scientific breakthrough with implications that extend beyond the scientific sphere, affecting all aspects of life. This scientific journey, full of complexities and uncertainties, requires effective yet responsible science communication to foster public trust (in science) and enthusiasm, as well as manage hype and expectations among the general public.

This presentation will share the outcome of the workshop Breaking News: We Found Extraterrestrial Life! hosted by the Lorentz Center at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands in September 2024. This interdisciplinary workshop brought together professional and amateur astronomers, science communicators, science journalists, historians, philosophers, and press information officers to address this challenge. Communicating astrobiology needs to prioritise transparency, clarity, and inclusivity. Engaging the public on this topic requires continuous updates and resilient public narratives that acknowledge both the successes and challenges of scientific discovery. Building trust (in science) requires openness about the capabilities and limitations of current research, as well as the usually slow and rigorous process of science.

The ultimate goal of astrobiology communication is to prepare the community and society at large for a range of possible scenarios involving groundbreaking discoveries. The presentation will share strategies to communicate the search for life elsewhere with the public, which requires balancing scientific rigour with public engagement. By using accessible language, addressing ethical considerations, and setting realistic expectations, we can ensure that astrobiology discoveries are properly understood and appreciated.

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