

URMA MKE 2016

Before even attending the annual conference, URMA had changed my life.

I honestly write that without an ounce of hyperbole.

After joining the group, I was following an email thread about the tools fellow URMAnS use to organize their work when someone mentioned a free web-based tool called Trello. Now, mere weeks later, Trello has helped organize our lab's web content, events, graphics projects, diversity recruitment efforts, onboarding process, my daily meal planning and my daughter's back to school supply list. My phone and computer have the Trello app open at all times, and I've even synced my watch so I get a little squeeze on the wrist when updates are made.

This example illustrates what I think is the best part of URMA – the willingness of brilliant professionals to share their secrets in the spirit of helping others be more successful.

The Einstein Effect: A Rookie URMAn Learns Tips of the Trade

If an indirect email thread was this beneficial, I couldn't imagine what an entire conference would deliver!

My first URMA conference was simply inspiring. It combined fantastic research communication tips with talented peers from which to learn.

AP writer Marilynn Marchione got the whole thing rolling with tips on science stories that get noticed (note to self: if your story is not interesting enough to talk about at the dinner table, work harder!). Marilynn's key points were strong reminders of the communications rulebook:

- You can't write about something you don't understand.
- Replace long or complicated words with shorter, simpler words.
- Use pronouncers for words people won't know how to say (even names).
- Personalize the story when it makes sense, but not when it feels like a stretch or compromises the main idea.
- Don't overpromise or overhype the work.
- Write in a way that makes people feel smarter after reading your story.

Panel talks on design, transitioning to management and communicating with photography presented a wide variety of perspectives and encouraged a rich dialogue with the audience on everything from covers to content to copyright rules. Apparently, Einstein photos are fairly complicated and costly to purchase, but always perform well with audiences. The photography and design panels were particularly inspirational, showcasing creative work from talented people and demonstrating how important visual elements are to a complete and compelling story.

Scientific American editor Michael D. Lemonick thoughtfully explored the fundamental incompatibilities between journalism and science (and how to work around them) and the purpose of journalism itself (to educate? to entertain? to inform?). Lemonick also extolled the value of science stories related to Einstein: Was he right? Was he wrong? Was he wrong about being wrong?

Day two's talks on collaboration and events were a nice reminder of the varied toolkit available to research communicators to engage audiences in our work (including an amazing event called "Celebrating Einstein."). It was such an honor and privilege to share information on the successful (and inexpensive) components of our National MagLab Open House event at my very first conference (Thank you, URMA!).

The day ended with a Fire Hose Session that's a little like professional speed dating. This opportunity to learn so much from so many in such a short period of time is truly exhilarating and something I would enjoy seeing even more of at future URMA conferences. All of the Fire Hose speakers were fantastic at presenting complex topics concisely. I particularly enjoyed learning about the Symmetry redesign and watching a demonstration in real-time on how to create an article in Medium, both in under 10 minutes!

The final day's roundtable provided rich details on the decade's biggest science story – the first detection of gravitational waves (as theorized by, you guessed it, Einstein!) and the first time a black hole merger was detected. The speakers enlightened us on the vetting process for a press release with more than 1,000 collaborators (!) and shared their home institution's specific strategies for getting a piece of the coverage. This talk also touched on a topic that could be a centerpiece of a future conference session -- training scientists on how to work with their internal communication team.

Cheese Curds & Collaborations

Milwaukee is beautiful city and UW-Milwaukee was an amazing host. Each day's talks were in a different part of campus, showcasing the diverse city and UW-Milwaukee campus. The city itself has more than its fair share of delicious breweries and bratwurst, that, when coupled with cheese curds, make for great brain food!

But perhaps most importantly, the URMA conference in Milwaukee was a perfect setting to meet and get to know a dynamic and talented group of communicators. I was so inspired by the honesty and support of my fellow URMAn who never came off as competitive or portrayed professional one-upsmanship, but rather openly shared both challenges and success in the spirit of collaboration and helping everyone improve.

Thank you for the chance to attend, and be a part of, #URMA2016. I look forward to continuing to learn from each of you and collaborating with my fellow URMAn in the coming months and years. On to #URMA2017...