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Until the recent conference in Milwaukee I was something of a lurker where URMA is concerned. I read with interest many of the Listserv discussions on anything from 'find an expert' databases, to long-form journalism, to the thorny issue of how to measure impact. Sometimes I might think I have something to say but – hesitating while I wondered if perhaps it wouldn't be relevant – more often than not the moment would be gone!

And so it was a wonderful realisation to find that in fact we all more or less share the same boat. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that we experience similar highs and lows in trying to promote University research to a general audience, the same need to keep abreast with the latest developments in social media and audiovisual, the same challenges with resourcing, messaging, target audience, and have the same questions over whether our own set-up is the right one to get the job done well. Nonetheless, for me, this was one of the many inspiring outcomes of the recent conference: it was a great pleasure to encounter enthusiastic and creative folk with a love for the precise turn of phrase that might best engage an audience. But realising the crossovers between us was just as great – it showed just how beneficial it is to be part of an organisation such as this.

The line-up of speakers was spot-on, as was the mix of longer length and firehose-style talks. Within this, there were some clear highlights for me.

Marilynn Marchione, chief medical writer at AP, was terrific at explaining how to extract the nugget that humanises and encourages people to read further and also how to be wary of exaggeration. One excellent suggestion was to think about who would disagree with the findings and perhaps even draw attention to the counter argument – looking at who disagrees with the finding helps to avoid overselling and hyperbole.

The firehose sessions were excellent and I'd welcome more of these at another conference. In particular John Toon's session on the easy wins that smartphones can provide in gathering audiovisual content was exactly the sort of push that I needed to try it myself. I would love to reach a stage where I go equipped to an interview to take photos, record a few soundbites and ambient noises or even a short film to accompany some text: the 'newsroom' in your pocket as John described.

At the LIGO panel discussion it was fascinating to hear about how the news was rolled out by those at the science end – the pressures they were under to avoid any mis-steps or controversies, to coordinate such a vast number of author's comments, and to keep the findings strictly secret. It was instructive to hear from some of those at the communications end about how they dealt with the difficulties of knowing something was coming, but not what. Situations like LIGO have been few and far between, but as big multinational interdisciplinary collaborations become more the norm, it was good to hear that we had learned lessons from the experience. In particular, it seems clear that we need to educate our own researchers to consider press officers as part of their team and not as the external media.

Just as good was the chance to chat to other delegates. Breakfasts became a chance to ponder over the mess of Brexit. One lunchtime introduced me to department 'take-over days' on Snapchat, another to the challenges of hosting publically available image libraries. A kind sharing of beers one evening led to the regaling of comms office stories that were both funny and wonderfully levelling. I very much hope to be able to attend future conferences and renew friendships. And I am going to try a lot harder to be better with Listserv.