

Do We Need to Re-think the NEO Communication strategy?

Rudolf Albrecht
Austrian Space Forum

Christian Koeberl
Department of Lithospheric Research
University of Vienna,
& Academy of Sciences, Austria



Context

In many ways the onset of the COVID pandemic (spring 2020) resembled the scenario which we have to expect when we discover an imminent NEO impact.

The problem is to convey the facts and the implications to a public, which is not knowledgeable in the matter, and which might not be inclined to take heed of any calls to action on the part of the scientists and on the part of the UN.

The mere warning of an impact will have economic ramifications, which will affect the public.

Examples abound, which show that political expedience, economic necessities, incredulity, deliberate misinformation and plain ignorance led to situations in which thousands of humans succumbed to the illness.

All this is being fanned by sensation-hungry media, which, for the sake of profit, happily provided visibility to even the most harebrained utterings of the most questionable characters.

We examined this phenomenon in our papers: Nagel, Albrecht, and Koeberl: “They don’t believe COVID; Will they believe the asteroid impact? (Poster presentation at the 2021 Planetary Defense Conference); and a full paper by Nagel, Albrecht, and Koeberl: “Planetary Defense: The Communication Challenge - Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic” (in press, Geological Society of America Special Paper, 2022)

Recent example: The Eruption of the Cumbre Vieja Volcano on La Palma

The questionable role of the media also became obvious during the recent outbreak of the Cumbre Vieja Volcano on La Palma, Canary Islands.

The media showed nighttime drone footage of the crater, complete with jets of flame, molten rock, destroyed houses, roads blocked by lava, and distraught residents. Airport closures were reported. Images of tourists fleeing the island on the ferry were shown. The impression of uncontrolled mayhem was created.

Reality was different. Yes, the airport had been closed on and off to remove volcanic dust from the runway. For a total of less than 10 hours. Some airlines elected not to provide service! Yes, houses were destroyed, but they had been built on the slopes of a volcano which had been active as recently as 1971.

The total affected area is about 3 square kilometers. The area affected by volcanic dust and precautionary measures (road closures, etc.) is about 10 km²

The real catastrophe is the fact that the tourists were scared off. Hotels and restaurants are empty. The owners are distraught.

Einschlag im Mai 2022?

0 KOMMENTARE

13.10.2021 10:05 (Akt. 13.10.2021 13:02)



Forscher behalten den Asteroiden genau im Auge. ©Glomex

Droht uns im Mai 2022 der Einschlag eines Asteroiden? Die NASA hat den Gesteinsbrocken "2009JF1" schon länger im Auge, da er der

The Current PD Communications Concept

The current plan is for IAWN to issue an impact alert, for the UN to pick it up, to communicate this to the member countries, who will then alert the general population according to national plans

This requires discipline and responsibility on the part of all links of this chain. It also requires the definition and the maintenance of the interfaces: unless the impact happens very soon, none of the original participants and designers will be available any longer.

Also: Who is IAWN? Who is the “UN”? The member states are presumably represented by the foreign ministries. Are they knowledgeable? How does the information propagate from there?

IAWN/COPUOS members will be asked directly by the media and by their governments- should they be free to say what they want? Should there be a party line? Who will define this and how? How to enforce? How to avoid ambiguous information spilling from any of these interfaces?

Large organizations (NASA, ESA) will be contacted directly by the media. How do we make sure that the information from all these sources is consistent and coordinated?

Communication Problems

During COVID the shortcomings of large national and international organisations became obvious: the World Health Organisation (WHO) was discredited, National authorities, like the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) were discredited by their own governments. Even within countries, different national institutions competed with each other.

Any number of experts, some genuine, some self-appointed, some grandstanding, added to the cacophony.

Public figures, politicians and celebrities and social media influencers played a questionable role.

The result was that the public got fed up and increasingly did not follow the anti-COVID measures. It also gave rise to limitless speculations.

In particular as these measures affected their economic environment of all people and their quality of life.

Proposal

An ultimate authority for the propagation of PD related information should be designated.

The global public/governments/media must be forcefully told that only information coming out of this international clearing house is to be believed and is to be acted upon

Sensation- hungry media must be provided with useful information on a regular basis to avoid the almost weekly news stories of a possible asteroid impact (crying-wolf-syndrom)

The global authority must be international, impartial, with no economic and political interests. It must be scientifically credible and it must be acceptable to the science community

It must not be seen as pursuing vested interests.

We need to do this soon-- Thus, to wait and “see with one’s own eyes” leaves dangerously little time to do anything.

The International Astronomical Union

Is being respected by all professional astronomers on the planet. Has a 100-year history of communication and coordination among professional astronomers

Already has working groups specializing in different subfields, such as minor bodies of the Solar System

Is used to working in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment. Collaborates and coordinates with UN-COPUOS

Has recently taken on the issue of global coordination and mitigation of the effects of light pollution and the effects of satellite megaconstellations on astronomical observations (Conference on “Dark and Quiet Skies for Science and Society”).

Will establish a SatHub Office, which will coordinate between satellite service providers and the large observatories to avoid conflicts and to protect astronomical facilities. This will include a service which will provide overflight and visibility data for all satellites in the planned megaconstellations.

This office, or a similar one, should be established as the one and only source of PD-related information. We need to impress on the public and in the media that only information coming from the IAU is to be taken seriously, and can be used as the basis for making decisions.



"All I'm saying is that asteroids are a liberal hoax."