



Research Administration in Japan: Pitching for Television in Tokyo

By David H. Kornhauser

Amazing discoveries continuously pour out of our centers, institutes, and university labs. All of this wealth of knowledge shuffles into sundry repositories, to be shared with other researchers, but what does the wider public know of what edges are bleeding where, and for what purpose?

Aside from the usual approach of distributing releases to reporters, inviting media representatives to events, or engaging the public directly via outreach programs, a novel approach gathering interest among Japanese research administrators is the idea of making direct pitches to television producers.

If a paper is published and no one notices...

The *Japan Association of Communication for Science and Technology* (JACST) was founded in 2007 as an informal gathering of science and technology communications professionals, for the purpose of aiding all manner of media and public outreach efforts, and since that time has been a regular presence at large domestic science events, as well as hosting their own skills-building workshops.

But beginning in 2010 one of the mainstays for the association has been the planning of regular meetings between communicators and television producers, from which a number of significant documentary projects have already achieved notable success.

A good example is the first-ever filming of giant squid in their natural environment, an idea which came about as a result of a JACST sponsored pitch to Japanese national broadcaster NHK. Documentaries featuring astonishing footage of the animal become enormously popular both for NHK as well as for co-sponsor the Discovery Channel. <http://www.discovery.com/tv-shows/curiosity/videos/monster-squid>

...Was the research funding well spent?

The relatively new profession of research administration (for Japan) has also begun to take shape over the course of these same seven odd years, and with many URAs becoming involved in getting the word out about research findings, it is inevitable that JACST has seen a rise in administrator attendance at its gatherings.

At the most recent such event in late November, for example, 10 institutes and universities (as well as several observers, including from science ministry MEXT) met in Tokyo to present their organizations to representatives from a similar number of media companies, mainly television broadcasters and production firms, but also the Japanese publisher of *National Geographic*. Each presentation lasted around 15 minutes, with most of the communicators and administrators highlighting major projects and research endeavors at their institutions.

Introducing Our New Japan Contributing Editor

Tadashi Sugihara is the Deputy Director at the Kyoto University Research Administration Office (KURA), in Kyoto, Japan. He studied physics at Tohoku University and obtained a Ph.D. degree in



Information Engineering from Kyushu Institute of Technology, Fukuoka, Japan. He worked as a neuroscientist in the RIKEN Brain Science Institute, Japan, the Zanvyl Krieger Mind/Brain Institute at the Johns Hopkins University and the Department of Neurobiology and Anatomy at University of Rochester to

investigate neuronal mechanisms of visual object recognition and sensory integration in the brain. While he was working at the RIKEN BSI-Toyota Collaboration Center as a senior scientist, he took responsibility of managing one of the research projects. He was a core member of the organizing committee for the international symposia "Kyoto-Swiss Symposium" which was jointly organized by Kyoto University, the ETH Zurich, University of Zurich and the EPFL and "Bordeaux-Kyoto Symposium" organized by KU and University of Bordeaux. He is also actively involved as an interviewer, a writer and a photographer with K.U.RESEARCH <http://research.kyoto-u.ac.jp> that is the Japanese KU website specifically featuring research activities and researchers at KU.

Kyoto University and the National Institute for Materials Science (NIMS) took a more focused approach, zeroing in on specific scientists and their personalities as a reflection of wider themes and institutional values.

In NIMS' case the spotlight was on a team of scientists working to recreate and expand the research of a deceased colleague, whose discoveries in the late 1980s of certain high-temperature superconductive ceramics had helped fuel the first surge in interest in the field.

Kyoto University, meanwhile, presented the work of two maverick specialists: The first, Yutaka Yamauchi, is a management school researcher exploring the role of design in solving problems related to food service (from hamburgers to high-end sushi).

<http://www.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en/research/forefronts/new/yamauchi.html>

The second presentation highlighted the work of Hiroaki Isobe, an assistant professor at Kyoto University's Unit for Synergetic Studies for Space, who reaches out not only to specialists in other fields but also to performing artists and even Buddhist temples, seeking to discover new ways for humanity to comprehend life in the space age.

<http://www.usss.kyoto-u.ac.jp/e/index-e.html>

The Zen of science communication

Television as a communication medium of course heavily favors visually powerful content, and hence purely on this basis the 'selling' of certain scientific ideas will always be easier than others. And even with the internet gnawing at its grip on viewers' eyeballs, well-crafted television can still deliver an unmatched immediacy and mass emotional reaction.

The JACST meetings therefore represent a unique opportunity for two worlds — science and mass media — to meet and freely discuss latest developments and new ideas. And for research administrators, these new tools can lead to innovations in extending the reach and overall value of investments in science. ■



David H. Kornhauser is a senior member of KURA, Kyoto University's central office of research administration. His email address is david@kura.kyoto-u.ac.jp