

ABOUT AGU

AGU Climate Scientists Offer Question-and-Answer Service for Media

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In fall 2009, AGU launched a member-driven pilot project to improve the accuracy of climate science coverage in the media and to improve public understanding of climate science. The project's goal was to increase the accessibility of climate science experts to journalists across the full spectrum of media outlets. As a supplement to the traditional one-to-one journalist-expert relationship model, the project tested the novel approach of providing a question-and-answer (Q&A) service with a pool of expert scientists and a Web-based interface with journalists. Questions were explicitly limited to climate science to maintain a nonadvocacy, nonpartisan perspective.

The Q&A Service and Assessment

More than 700 Ph.D. scientists responded to a call from section leaders to volunteer for 2 hours during the 7–18 December 2009 Copenhagen negotiations to answer climate science questions from journalists. With the support of a nine-person volunteer team from the University of California, Berkeley, the project infrastructure included a shared e-mail in-box, a project Web site, and media and e-mail training. During each 2-hour shift, six scientists were on call to answer questions submitted by journalists and were able to collaborate among themselves through the shared e-mail account. Students from many schools volunteered behind the scenes to provide research assistance and logistical support.

Fifty-four climate science inquiries were received from 27 media outlets, ranging from national and international outlets such as *Newsweek*, National Public Radio, and the *UK Sunday Times*, to local newspapers and radio stations, to Internet blogs, freelancers, and fact checkers. Fourteen of these 27 journalists replied to a survey after the event (see Figure 1), and in response to the question, "Do you think we should offer the Q&A service again at a future date?," all of them replied, "yes, absolutely" (highest rating on a 7-point scale). All would recommend the service to colleagues (response of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale). A majority rated the answers provided by the scientists as very high quality (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale) on all surveyed characteristics (concise, quotable, complete, thoughtful, well documented, easy to understand, and timely). Relative to traditional phone interviews, a

majority rated the Q&A service as superior or equivalent on all dimensions. Several commented that the Q&A service, individual e-mails, and individual phone calls serve different purposes, indicating that the Q&A service complements other forms of information gathering.

To see the full project report, including survey responses from the participating scientists and students, visit <http://www.agu.org/cop15science>.

Next Steps

In response to suggestions from participants, AGU is exploring a variety of possible next steps, including continued Q&A service, a science communications interest

group, additional media training, a referral service, and a response network to correct errors. In the coming months, AGU leadership and staff will also be looking at how AGU can best respond to member-generated initiatives as part of ongoing operations.

If you would like to receive information about these and other upcoming science communications efforts, sign up at <http://www.agu.org/comminfo/>. Please note that December Q&A participants are already on the distribution list.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all who participated in the pilot for helping AGU find new ways to bring science knowledge to the public! AGU would like to specifically thank the University of California, Berkeley Q&A project team members: Sam Borgeson, Zoë Chafe, Danielle Svehla Christianson, Emily Chueh, Anna Kantanbacher, Cathy Kunkel, Suzie Shin, Adam B. Smith, and Anna Sommer.

—STACY JACKSON, Project Director of AGU Climate Science Q&A for Copenhagen; E-mail: stacyjackson@berkeley.edu

A New AGU Focus: Member-Generated Initiatives

The idea for a question-and-answer service during the December 2009 Copenhagen negotiations was proposed by AGU member Stacy Jackson, through Biogeosciences president-elect Jennifer Harden, to AGU's director of strategic communications and outreach, Ann Cairns. Thanks to the nimbleness of AGU; the leadership of Robert T. Van Hook, AGU's interim executive director; and the countless hours of volunteers and staff, this project was launched and completed within 2 months.

If you have an idea and would like to lead a member-driven initiative, contact your section or focus group leader (see http://www.agu.org/about/governance/section_fg/). If you would like to receive more information about upcoming science communications activities, sign up at <http://www.agu.org/comminfo>.

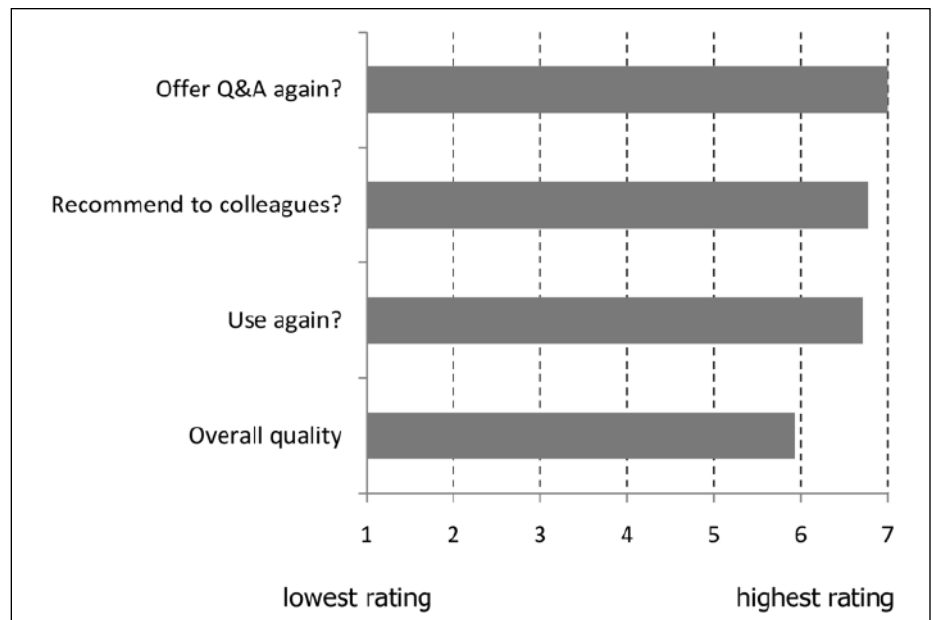


Fig. 1. Journalists' responses to a survey after the climate science question-and-answer (Q&A) session, held during the 7–18 December 2009 Copenhagen negotiations.