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CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR AN INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE
TO A THREATENING NEAR EARTH OBJECT

Abstract

As the many impact craters on Earth and the Moon attest, over time these bodies have been subject to numerous impacts from asteroids and comets that orbit near Earth. Over the millennia, the Moon and Earth have swept up many of these Near Earth Objects (NEOs), but many more still orbit the sun and may at some time cross Earth's orbit, perhaps causing indescribable damage to populated areas. The wide uncertainties surrounding predictions of the point of impact and the enormous possible damage any one NEO might inflict lead to the conclusion that any response needs to be organized and carried out on an international basis.

The 2008 report of the Association of Space Explorers (ASE) recommended that the international community set up three functional groups to respond to such an eventuality: An Information Analysis and Warning Network (IAWN); A Mission Planning and Operations Group (MPOG) of agencies from spacefaring States to organize a deflection mission; and an Intergovernmental Mission Authorization and Oversight Group (MAOG) to authorize action if a potentially hazardous NEO is discovered.

In 2010, in support of the Working Group on NEOs of the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), Secure World Foundation (SWF) and the ASE hosted a workshop to explore the components that would be needed to establish a fully functional IAWN. The report of that workshop urged the development of "a communications strategy...and an outreach and education plan" as key elements of an effective response plan to the NEO threat.

In order to understand what factors need to be considered to develop an effective communications strategy, SWF and ASE convened a November 2011 workshop designed to explore in detail the views of risk communication experts and experienced science journalists on the question. This paper reports on the findings of the workshop, in which nearly 40 scientists, reporters, risk communication specialists and SWF staff took part. The meeting was held at the University of Colorado, Boulder's Laboratory for Atmospheric and Space Physics (LASP), Boulder, Colorado.