

Building Bridges in Berlin

How six PhDnet doctoral students organized the “Visions in Science” conference

The biggest interdisciplinary conference for Max Planck junior scientists lasts three days, but the preparations take months. Any number of obstacles need to be overcome on the way – and still not everything ends up being perfect.

Breaking down barriers between scientific disciplines, promoting new intellectual approaches and understanding how others see things – this is the aspiration behind the meeting of some 100 doctoral students from all institutes who get together every year for the annual “Visions in Science” conference. Based loosely on mathematician Leonhard Euler and his Seven Bridges of Königsberg problem, the organizing team chose the motto “Bridge the Gap” as a sign of this exchange across all Sections of the MPG.

With such a large conference to stage, in Berlin, while also doing their doctoral work and facing many stumbling blocks along the way – the team that took on the task realized in hindsight that the conference motto could equally apply to the tricky feat of organization that went on behind the scenes.

The team consisting of Filippo Guarneri (MPI for Gravitational Physics, Golm), Gianna Triller (MPI for Infection Biology, Berlin), Jan Niklas Grieb (MPI



Busy organizers: Gianna Triller (right) speaks with Hans-Dieter Burkhard, professor at HU Berlin, and Stas Wüst (left), while Filippo Guarneri discusses preparations with Jan Niklas Grieb and Christoph Sträter (back, left to right). Below, the participants of the conference.

for Extraterrestrial Physics, Garching), Stas Wüst (MPI for Heart and Lung Research, Bad Nauheim), Leonhard Horstmeier (MPI for Mathematics in the Sciences, Leipzig) and Christoph Sträter (MPI for the Physics of Complex Systems, Dresden) did eventually manage to make the impossible possible – a fact that, despite careful planning, was ulti-

mately attributable to compromises, improvisation and a bit of luck.

For example, the MPI for Infection Biology made its historic lecture hall on the Charité Campus available, the catering team made every effort to address everybody’s culinary needs, and the podium discussion was even arranged to take place in the spectacular



The Power of Images

How animal rights activists purposefully generate sympathy

lecture hall ruins at the Museum of Medical History. “We were thrilled to be able to get top scientists like Julia Fischer, Jürgen Renn and Alexander Borst to come and hold the scientific talks.”

But did they really manage to build actual, passable bridges between Julia Fischer’s field research with the friendly bonobos (behavioral biology) and areas such as Alexander Borst’s neurobiological work on the visual cortex of the fruit fly, which he presented with the catchy title “In the fly’s cockpit”? “Everyone presented their cutting-edge projects here, there’s no doubt about that. But evidence of thinking outside the box and even boldly presenting their visions for the next ten years – that’s something I would like to see even more of,” remarked Norman Gerstner, team leader of Visions 2013.

Nevertheless, the event has been gathering speed since 2012 owing to the generous support of the MPG and sponsors like BASE, McKinsey, Lanxess and Corporate Quality, and the events in Bremen and Dresden generated a certain pressure to deliver. “That’s why, when I look back, I’m not entirely satisfied with the outcome of the conference,” said this year’s team leader, Filippo Guarnieri.

What the critical junior scientist doesn’t mention is that he also wrote and defended his dissertation during the twelve months he was preparing the conference – preferring to dwell rather on the positive experiences: “Our team gave its best and, for my part, I can say that I learned a great deal about team communication. And the conference was certainly better organized than any other I’ve ever attended,” he summed up, laughing.

All of the speeches are available to view on **maxNet.tv**:

 maxload.rzg.mpg.de/wp

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With disturbing footage of monkeys used in experimentation, animal rights activists are not seeking to present a full picture. When it comes to scandal-mongering, however, the truth is discarded, as the example of the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics shows.

In the programs broadcast by *stern TV* on September 10 and 17, illegally obtained footage from the animal holding facility of the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics was shown under the title “Suffering for Science.” A British (BUAV) and a German animal rights organization (SOKO Tierschutz) succeeded in infiltrating the MPI in Tübingen with an activist who was employed as an animal care worker for six months. SOKO Tierschutz praised this action as the largest “undercover investigation into animal welfare in Germany” to date.

A few minutes of film material were edited together from the 100 hours of footage. The selection of images was by no means an objective portrayal of the way animals are held and treated at the institute – the images chosen were those most suitable for making an emotional impact on people and discrediting animal experimentation research.

The images show animals directly after surgery. These images are hard to watch, but are hardly different than those after surgical intervention on humans. They show a seriously ill animal whose case the Max Planck Society explained in detail in the supplement to the position statement published on its website. SOKO Tierschutz misused this case to suggest misleading conclusions. Moreover, the images also showed behavioral patterns in animals that animal attendants and animal welfare officers at the institute had never observed.

There are now various pieces of evidence indicating that certain footage was actually provoked by manipulating the animals or their environment. Many images were produced when the infiltrated animal attendant was alone with the animals. This gave him the opportunity to influence the situation. The MPG has also outlined one such case in detail. These experiences are congruent with those of col-

leagues in the United Kingdom. There, Imperial College London fell victim to an undercover investigation in April 2013 carried out by the British animal rights organization BUAV.

In a compilation of shortcomings, the BUAV set out 180 alleged infringements of animal welfare regulations. The Animals in Science Regulation Unit (ASRU), the body responsible for monitoring animal experimentation in the UK, published the findings of its investigation several weeks ago. The accusations were substantiated in only five cases, but – according to the ASRU – “they did not involve significant avoidable or unnecessary pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm” at any time.

An initial investigation of the situation in Tübingen by Prof. Stefan Treue, the expert appointed by the President of the MPG, is also pointing in the same direction. The head of the German Primate Center confirmed that employees at the institute treated the animals with great care: “No neglect of the animals has been observed, and the documents provide evidence of close medical care of the animals at the institute,” said Treue. An investigation is, of course, being carried out independently of this by the authorities in Stuttgart, who have sent the institute a comprehensive list of questions.

National TV coverage was limited to *stern TV* and *Bild*, but there was clearly greater interest regionally, where the reporting was generally well balanced. However, the intensity and intolerant aggressiveness of the well-organized and interconnected animal rights activists on social media and via e-mail was very damning. Numerous Max Planck Society employees – not just those at the institute in Tübingen – were exposed to abuse and offensive remarks.

To ensure that their supporters continue to make donations, the animal rights organizations upped the ante: a demonstration was organized in Stuttgart at the end of October and the BUAV announced the publication of a comprehensive report. The question remains: Are the objectives of the organizations always as genuine as they claim?

A New Chapter for Harnack House

Nobel Prize laureate Eric Kandel gives the first Harnack Lecture before 250 invited guests



Eric Kandel held the first Harnack Lecture in the Goethe Hall.

Bridge-building between the times – this is an apt motto for the re-inauguration of Harnack House in Dahlem. Eighty-five years after Adolf von Harnack inaugurated the building as an international meeting venue for the Kaiser Wilhelm Society (KWG), the villa designed by Carl Sattler is now a contemporary conference facility for the Max Planck Society following a two-year renovation period. “Respect for tradition inspired our architects to embrace the historic spirit of this venue using modern materials for the present era,” remarked Max Planck President Martin Stratmann at the opening ceremony in the Goethe Hall. He also thanked the patrons of the

MPG whose financial support enabled the project to be carried out.

The new Harnack Lecture played a prominent part in the celebratory evening at the end of October. In the future, this honorary lecture will be held annually by an internationally renowned scientist at the invitation of the President. In this way, the MPG aims to commemorate the Founding President of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society and his commitment to an international focus, excellence and open-mindedness.

The series was launched by Eric Kandel, who also sought to build a bridge between the times in his lecture “Art and science in Vienna circa 1900.”

With great humor and wit, he explored how the new contemporary psychoanalysis was reflected in the portrait art of Klimt, Kokoschka and Schiele, and also looked at the discoveries of modern neuroscience. Kandel, who was born in Vienna in 1929, had to flee from the Nazis to the US. With his Nobel Prize-winning neurological research, he made significant discoveries about the molecular bases of memory formation.

The Harnack Lecture on **maxNet.tv**:

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