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Beyond Outreach: Communication as Advocacy for Research Infrastructures — ESO's Paranal Observatory Case Study

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Large-scale research infrastructures rely on stable environments and long-term political support - yet both are increasingly fragile. ESO's Paranal Observatory in Chile - home to the Very Large Telescope, the future Extremely Large Telescope, and the southern array of the future Cherenkov Telescope Array Observatory - now faces a serious threat from a proposed industrial megaproject in its immediate vicinity. The light pollution, vibrations, and dust expected from a planned green energy plant and port, only 10 kilometres away from a unique site for research, jeopardise future astronomical observations and risk destroying one of the last truly dark places on Earth.

This case raises urgent questions for research communicators: can we remain “neutral” when the very conditions that make research possible are at stake? What role should communication play in advocacy? And how do we navigate political terrain that is unfamiliar to most science communicators?

ESO's response required moving beyond traditional outreach to adopt the tools of strategic advocacy. The campaign combined targeted press work, visual storytelling, stakeholder engagement, and mobilisation of international networks to raise awareness and secure political attention at the highest levels. Messages were reframed from narrow technical concerns to broader values: protecting global scientific heritage, safeguarding dark skies for future generations, and preserving major investments made by ESO's Member States.

The outcome demonstrates how research communication can shape public discourse and influence policy decisions when infrastructures are under threat. It also underscores the delicate balance between maintaining scientific credibility and taking a stand in politically sensitive contexts, as well as the risks of silence in moments of crisis.

This case study offers lessons for other research infrastructures on navigating the boundary between neutrality and impact, and shows how advocacy can be not only legitimate, but essential.

Workshops only: Duration

Workshops only: participants

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