

The message in the noise: Reflections on complexity in communicating science

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One of the most vital forms of translation today is that from scientific findings to public and policy messages. Human society has risen to become a dominant “force of Nature”, recognized by the geological term Anthropocene, describing an increasingly complex relationship between people and planet. Our understanding of this complexity is evolving, and is itself contributing to the complexity. It seems that we now live in a world of “hyper-complexity”, where the anticipation of future events, based on mostly an incomplete understanding, feeds back to influence current events (“contamination by prediction”). Information is an increasingly valuable commodity, and the ability to recognize messages amongst noise, and translate them, is critical. I will reflect on two examples. First, a message that may have been lost for centuries to millennia in the remnants of a South African stone age society which illustrates how our preconceptions may blind us from perceiving and engaging with a remarkable early scientific insight. Second, the widely misinterpreted “butterfly effect” that originated in climatology, and whose correct understanding could help us to engage more productively with the notion of the limits on our predictive ability in a complex world.