

Boaty McBoatface - PR triumph or disaster?

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On March 17, 2016, the UK Natural Environment Research Council issued a press release launching the #NameOurShip campaign. We expected modest interest from the press and hoped to gain some traction on Twitter/Facebook, intending that our novel idea would inspire some name suggestions and engage factions of the public in the amazing science our new research vessel will carry out in the Polar Regions when she sets sail in 2019. Within days, we were taking calls through the night from international media as our social media campaign went viral. Our website crashed under huge volumes of traffic. We trended for hours on Twitter and saw a huge swell of visitors to our all our digital platforms. How did this happen? Boaty McBoatface. A funny name, submitted by a member of the public via our website that captured the world's imagination and spawned countless imitators, news stories, memes, debates, online trolls and cries of the death of democracy. Over the weeks that ensued, we managed unprecedented interest from the public, receiving thousands of emails, enquiries, suggestions and votes, culminating in our CEO and head of communications being summoned to answer to MPs in the House of Commons. They wanted to know: Boaty McBoatface - PR triumph or disaster?

During the oral presentation, Karen (NERC social media manager) and Mary (news and media manager) will take the delegates through the story of how the #NameOurShip campaign evolved into (arguably) one of the biggest social media sensations of the year (so far!) and reflect on the level of engagement we achieved and its value to NERC as a research council. We will share data showing the huge reach of the campaign, talk through our initial planning, share some highlights and lowlights and talk about how we, as a small communications team, managed the level of interest. We will also talk about what we learnt on the way, and look at what NERC will do/has done to continue the momentum and public engagement.

NERC is the UK's main agency for funding and managing research, training and knowledge exchange in the environmental sciences. Our work covers the full range of atmospheric, earth, biological, terrestrial and aquatic science, from the deep oceans to the upper atmosphere and from the poles to the equator. We co-ordinate some of the world's most exciting research projects, tackling major issues such as climate change, environmental influences on human health, the genetic make-up of life on Earth, and much more. NERC is a non-departmental public body, receiving around £330m of annual funding from the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills. Our new polar research vessel, now named RRS sir David Attenborough, will be operated by the NERC British Antarctic Survey.