

Mass participation experiments: reaching new audiences through internet based experiments

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Abstract

Lots of people, young and old, like finding things out whether or not they regard that as science. Involving people in the process of scientific experimentation can be a powerful way of engaging them with science. Devising experiments that are scientifically meaningful, operate outside the confines of the lab, that can deal with data collected by non-specialists is – to say the least – challenging. But the potential impact of mass experiments is huge.

The BA has been involved in a number of mass participation experiments. But it was not until the internet was widely accessible to the target audience that the experiments really started to take off.

Walking with Woodlice (a UK biodiversity survey of woodlice run by The Natural History Museum and launched in association with the BA) and LaughLab (an investigation into the psychology of humour run with the University of Hertfordshire) are both successful examples of this genre in terms of the quality and quantity of the data collected and in effective feedback to the contributors. Both were designed using the web for two reasons. The web is the only realistic means of collecting and collating the vast amounts of data necessary for the experiments to be useful. And the web is the most cost effective in terms of its potential for engaging many people. Careful attention was paid to the design and content of the websites. But how do you get people to go and look at your website? Is there anybody out there?

Drawing on several examples, but concentrating on LaughLab, we will show how millions of people took part in the largest scientific experiment in the world to find the world's funniest joke and critically assess its scientific validity.