

#2017MMM: An Example of Multimedia Scientific Communication

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To observe a science communicator, I observed March Mammal Madness, which is a public engagement project started by Katie Hinde. Since its inception in 2013, March Mammal Madness has grown into an international event with a large team of scientists sharing the planning and execution of this month-long outreach endeavor. The concept is modeled on an NCAA tournament, with different animals competing against each other in a bracket. Data on each animal's size, habitat, and fighting abilities are used to generate probabilities of each winning, and randomness is introduced in selecting the winner of each outcome. Higher-seeded animals get the advantage of competing within their own habitat in the first rounds, and in the final rounds, habitat is chosen at random. The scientific team then develop a narrative surrounding the battle that incorporates facts gleaned from peer-reviewed sources, and then live-tweet the narrative of each battle. After each set of battles, the tweets are documented via Storify and posted on Hinde's blog and the March Mammal Madness Facebook page.

I originally participated in the first March Mammal Madness in 2013. Back then, it was on a smaller scale, and it seemed that it mostly just for a bunch of animal biology nerds to have some fun with March Madness. Since then it has grown exponentially, and some educators now build classroom curricula to coincide with March Mammal Madness. This year, the organizers made the bracket selection available to educators early to plan curricula, and over 200 educators took advantage of this. The scientific planning team has now expanded to include eight scientists narrating the battles. Additionally, a scientific illustrator creates accompanying artwork, two additional scientists tweet facts about the individual species, and the American Society of Mammalogists and Cleveland Museum of Natural History tweet facts and images. This year, #2017MMM began with additional fanfare, including an outreach event at Arizona State University and a green-screened theatrical version of the wild card battle. Additionally, fans have created their own blog or video recaps.

I've followed along March Mammal Madness every year, but my interest often wanes. Each year, I start out following enthusiastically, but lose interest as my favorites become eliminated. This year, I intended to follow the entire tournament. I was especially invested in this year's battles, as my favorite animal and study species, Geoffroy's spider monkey, was a

competitor. One of the great strengths of March Mammal Madness is that it's easily adaptable to needs of different educators and interest groups. In the past, my participation was for fun. However, I have colleagues that used it in teaching undergraduates and high school students. For some, it was a fun teaching opportunity that they could incorporate for extra credit. For others, they could build a curriculum around it. Many scientists and educational organizations now use it as an opportunity to share facts about their study species. This year, in addition to incorporating it as one of our lab's social activities, I wrote a blog post about the spider monkey's shot at the championship and took advantage of the spider monkey battle days to tweet pictures and fun factoids about spider monkeys. And, since many scientists enjoy trash-talking the competition, I took advantage to share pictures, facts, and some trash-talk about a fellow primate competitor, the white-headed (or white-faced) capuchin monkey.

The drawback of March Mammal Madness, however, is that it's so drawn out, and keeping up with the live-tweets is time-consuming. The first week, each battle day took about three hours to live-tweet—for a total of approximately nine hours a week. Despite my best intentions, I didn't have the time or energy to spend following the live-action, so I ended up focusing on tweeting and following the action on days when the spider monkeys competed, and caught up the next day with recaps and Storify. However, while they were useful summaries of who won/lost, reading through the Storify can be tedious, and I imagine for those that aren't familiar with twitter, it may be hard to follow.

While the spider monkeys made it to the final four, they were beaten by the honey badger, and as usual, my interest waned once my favorite was eliminated. While, March Mammal Madness is fun, and a great opportunity for educators to introduce mammalian biology and behavior, I think it's hard to track over the course of the month unless you are very invested. In our own lab group, I did my best to provide updates, but by the end, none of our lab's undergraduates kept up and tabulated their brackets. Nonetheless, I think it's a great resource for elementary school teachers, who can take advantage of the early brackets and associated information to build their own lesson plans around the mammalian competitors. This year, it received a large amount of media attention, including articles in Gizmodo, NPR, and other outlets, and the media interest indicate it's become an incredibly successful outreach effort. The lessons I've learned from March Mammal Madness are that 1) public engagement can and

should be fun, and 2) building a recurring, large-scale public engagement project requires a lot of initial investment, but requires a larger team to be sustainable.

For more information:

- **Hinde's blog:** <http://mammalssuck.blogspot.com/2017/02/dont-call-it-is-comeback-weve-been-here.html>
- **Gizmodo's coverage:** <http://gizmodo.com/mammals-battle-for-greatness-in-march-madness-for-scienc-1793605921>
- **NPR's coverage:** <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/03/29/521148505/a-new-kind-of-march-madness-hits-schools>
- **My blog post on the spider monkeys' prospects:**
<http://spidermonkeytales.blogspot.com/2017/03/10-reasons-spider-monkeys-could-be.html>