**Podcasting for transformative water communication**

*In this blog post, Emanuele Fantini, reflects on how podcasting has transformed the way he does research, and addresses a broader question: what is the role of communication in the transformation pathways that we study and promote?*

Emanuele Fantini[[1]](#footnote-1)

At the end of the first day of the “**Water Transformation Pathways Planning” project’s annual workshop**, our exquisite hosts, the team of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Guwahati, organised a visioning walk in the surroundings of our venue, among the beautiful hills of Kaziranga (Assam State, India). We walked through tea gardens and ended up on a small farm where sericulture is practiced – two of the hallmarks of this region. Learning how the silkworm produces silk through its life cycle, refreshed my memory about the caterpillar’s metamorphosis into a butterfly that we study as one of the first science lessons in school. That made me think about **the difference between metamorphosis and transformation**, the latter being one of the central ideas of our project: “Water Transformation Pathways Planning”. While both concepts imply the idea of change, I think that metamorphosis emphasises the personal, sometimes even intimate, dimension of change: it is a transformation of the being, of the character in the story. But how was this related to our annual workshop?

The second day of the workshop focused on communication. It looked like a day mainly about skills, with parallel hands-on sessions on how to write a blog, how to make a podcast, and how to communicate with videos. But it was also the opportunity to raise a more fundamental question, theoretical and practical at the same time: **what is the role of communication in the water transformation pathways that we are studying and planning**? And how should we communicate our work and our results to contribute to such transformation? I believe that part of the answer lies in a metamorphosis: we need to change our individual practices and styles of communicating science and research to contribute to broader collective transformations in the water sector.

In the parallel session on “how to make a podcast”, I shared three aspects of how podcasting has transformed the way I do and communicate research, even beyond podcasts. Participants in that session, explored the transformative potential of podcasting by recording and editing interviews with each other.

The first transformative potential of podcasting is about **active listening.** I like to think that the practice of interviewing people for podcasts has helped me to become a better listener (although my family would argue that there is still a wide room for improvement…). When recording a conversation for a podcast you have to learn and apply several elements of active listening: discerning when to talk and when to keep silent, interpreting body language, paraphrasing and summarising, asking follow-up questions, and paying attention to emotion by recording not only *what* people say, but also *how* they say it.

The second transformative potential of podcasting is related to **reflexivity**. Editing a podcast has helped me to become a more reflexive author. The process of editing a podcast can be scary, as you literally give or take away voice. Therefore, it is crucial to be accountable for the choices that we make as authors and hosts of the podcast. These choices should be explained in the podcast, also to guide the listeners and help them follow your story. Many people don’t like to listen to their voice recorded. However, listening to your own podcast can be a good opportunity to reflect on your voice as an author and on your practice as a researcher and communicator.

The third transformative potential of podcasting calls for a better **focus** **on the audience**. Making podcasts has pushed me to think more thoroughly and strategically about who is the audience that I want to reach and what impact I want to have when once I reach them. The podcast is a slow and intimate medium, through which you literally speak in the ears of the listener, for a much longer time than the average attention that people pay to social media posts or videos. Such a relationship should be nurtured and cherished. In podcast training, you learn that it is essential to imagine that you are talking directly to one of those listeners. You need to think about who they are, what they would like to know about your topic, how will you let them know that your podcast exists, how will you ask them for feedback and incorporate it into your work…

Active listening, reflexive authorship, and focus on the audience. In my experience, these are three potentials of podcasting for a metamorphosis in our communication style and practices to contribute to transformations in the water sector. I have applied these potentials in the classroom, learning that asking students to make podcasts as an assignment [can be a fun and effective way to practice skills for interdisciplinary work.](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-024-04119-6) Our experience with the podcast [The Sources of the Nile](https://nilewaterlab.org/podcast-the-sources-of-the-nile/), indicates that a podcast can be an effective way to [create and nurture a community of research and practice](https://jcom.sissa.it/article/pubid/JCOM_2002_2021_N01/), within and beyond a project (Fantini and Buist 2021).

In the end, the shape and function of a pod is not too different from that of a cocoon. Therefore, if you wish to carve your own space for cultivating your metamorphosis toward transformative water communication I invite you to read the following articles and get in touch!

[Fantini, E. (2024). Podcasting for interdisciplinary education: active listening, negotiation, reflexivity, and communication skills. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 11(1), 1-9.](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-024-04119-6)

[Fantini, E., & Buist, E. (2021). Searching for the Sources of the Nile through a podcast: what did we find?. Journal of Science Communication, 20(2), N01](https://jcom.sissa.it/article/pubid/JCOM_2002_2021_N01/).

1. Emanuele Fantini is Associate Professor of Water Politics and Communication at IHE Delft Institute for Water Education. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)