



Contribution ID: 450

Type: **Poster presentation**

Hangout With CERN - Reaching the Public with the Collaborative Tools of Social Media

Monday, 14 October 2013 15:00 (45 minutes)

On July 4, 2012, particle physics became a celebrity. Around 1,000,000,000 people (yes, 1 billion) saw rebroadcasts of two technical presentations announcing discovery of a new boson. The occasion was a joint seminar of the CMS and ATLAS collaborations, and the target audience were members of those collaborations plus interested experts in the field of particle physics. Yet, the world ate it up like a sporting event.

Roughly two days later, in a parallel session of ICHEP in Melbourne, Australia, a group of physicists decided to explain the significance of this discovery to the public. They started up a tool called “Hangout”, part of the new Google+ social media platform, to converse directly with the public via videoconference and webcast. The demand to join this Hangout overloaded the server several times. In the end, a compromise involving Q&A via comments was set up, and the conversation was underway.

I present a new project born from this experience, called Hangout With CERN, and discuss its success in creating an effective conversational channel between the public and high-energy physicists. I review earlier efforts by both CMS and ATLAS contributing to this development, and then describe the current programme, involving nearly all aspects of CERN, and some topics that go well beyond that. I conclude by discussing the potential of the program both to improve our accountability to the public and to train our community for public communication.

Summary

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Session Classification: Poster presentations

Track Classification: Facilities, Production Infrastructures, Networking and Collaborative Tools