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A matter of time . . .

Posted on September 9th, 2009 by earle holland

There's been a recent trend among the scholars and science communications' practitioners to suggest that researchers and scientists should speak out more publicly in explaining their work. If more researchers were visible and vocal, the logic goes, the public would be better informed about the science affecting public policy decisions today.

On its face, that makes a lot of sense. But it is fundamentally flawed.

All things scientific have become enormously complex in the past decades. Grasping the implications that new research advances bring requires a basic understanding of the subject. How can the public seriously discuss the merits and risks of genetically modified organisms or stem-cell research if they don't understand the basic biology of DNA, or how proteins and enzymes work in the body?

The gap between the public's basic collective knowledge and the scientists' understanding has become gargantuan. Bridging it requires more than just better presentation skills on the part of researchers.

But that concept – that scientists should learn to be better communicators – is at the core of a movement supporting “[framing science](#),” and one of the country's most vocal proponents of it, [Matt Nisbet](#), is touting its benefits in [an upcoming paper](#) in the *American Journal of Botany*. A [column](#) last week in the respected *Columbia Journalism Review* focused on this issue.



The basic notion of framing is, as I understand it, that to effectively convey information to an audience of readers, viewers or listeners, one has to tailor the message so that it corresponds to audience interests. These “frames,” as they're called, are the architecture by which information is conveyed, the structure around which facts and context are built.

In essence, the teller-of-the-tale determines the best path along which to lead the audience.

Where this seemingly logical approach falls flat is the fact that the “teller” plans beforehand where he/she wants the audience to go. That's straightforward persuasive communications, but traditionally scientists – and science journalists, for that matter – are supposed to be providing information, not swaying opinion.

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- * [March 2011](#)
- * [December 2010](#)
- * [October 2010](#)
- * [September 2010](#)
- * [August 2010](#)
- * [July 2010](#)
- * [June 2010](#)
- * [May 2010](#)
- * [April 2010](#)
- * [March 2010](#)
- * [February 2010](#)
- * [January 2010](#)
- * [December 2009](#)
- * [November 2009](#)
- * [October 2009](#)
- * [September 2009](#)
- * [August 2009](#)
- * [July 2009](#)
- * [June 2009](#)
- * [May 2009](#)

In essence, doing so differs little from the current trend of marketing and “messaging” where a specific set of statements is continually thrown at an audience in hopes that with time and repetition, the audience will absorb the new mindset. As a tactic long used in advertising, there’s nothing fundamentally wrong with this approach. In the area of public health, for example, it is the wisest and most effective method available. We want the public to adopt safe activities and actions – our motives are transparent.

But that doesn’t apply for most of the sciences where the object is to uncover information and make it available to all. This issue of the intent of the story-teller is problematic for science.

But that’s not the biggest problem:

Simply put, most researchers simply don’t have the time to enhance their communications skills and, if they did, few have the time available to undertake the kind of evangelism to the public that these “science framers” would like.

In [my response to the CJR posting](#) touting the Nisbet paper, I wrote:

In 2007, more than 6,000 researchers responded to a survey by the Federal Demonstration Project intended to gauge how scientists spent their time while working on federal research grants. The report said then that 42 percent of the researchers’ time was now “devoted to pre- and post-award administrative activities – not to active research,” and that compliance issues — adherence to regulations, and the simple management of projects — stole time away from their doing the actual science.

And the case here at Ohio State University, for example, seems even worse concerning available researchers’ time. According to Julie Carpenter-Hubin, director of [Institutional Research and Planning](#), the results of a 2007 faculty survey provide a clear picture of the challenge of faculty finding more time for public engagement.

According to the survey, university faculty say their typical workweek lasts 57 hours (for assistant professors), 56 hours (for associate professors) and 58 hours (for full professors). All faculty surveyed were either tenured or tenure-track.

Assistant professors report spending 36 percent of their workweek on research. Associate professors say they spend anywhere from 21 percent to 29 percent of their time on research and full professors say 31 percent of their time can be spent on research. The rest of their time, they said, was spent on non-research activities like teaching, meeting with students and preparing for class.

Surprisingly, both associate professors and full professors said that they spent 1 percent of their time “talking with the (news) media.”

The question rests with how researchers should spend their time. A recent



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- * [March 2009](#)
- * [February 2009](#)
- * [January 2009](#)
- * [December 2008](#)
- * [November 2008](#)
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- * [September 2008](#)
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survey by the [Pew Research Center for People & the Press](#) showed that the public's respect for scientists and their work was substantially greater than it was for clergy, journalists, lawyers and business executives, in that order. One assumes that it is the work scientists do that's held in such high regard.

What's worrisome about all of this is the notion that some so-called experts continue to suggest approaches that are unrealistic. How are research faculty supposed to find the additional time to devote to more communications when their average workweek already surpasses the standard American's by 25 to 50 percent?

Scientists are not opposed to doing more science communications.

But they'd much rather do more science instead. *__Earle Holland*



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4 Responses to “A matter of time . . .”

[paul baker](#) // Sep 10, 2009 at 12:41 pm

Earle,

I find this topic extremely engaging.

You touch on a crucial issue, and it's one that I deal with every day as a university communicator.

I work with researchers to help them get their message out to a fairly wide audience of educators, policymakers, administrators, and media people.

I hope that I add value to researchers' work by translating the essence of their findings into 'plain English,' and by using many modes of distribution, (online and print) to share this knowledge. I agree that it would be unreasonable to expect researchers to do all this, on top of what they already do.

At the same time, I have witnessed some embarrassingly bad presentations by researchers who in fact have a lot to offer. For one reason or another they have not developed their speaking and presentation skills. That's regrettable, because sharing knowledge with the wider world is the third leg of the academic stool: teaching, research, and public service.

Sharing scientific knowledge is a responsibility shared by researchers and communicators, and we all can do better.

Paul Baker

Wisconsin Center for Education Research

School of Education

U of Wisconsin Madison

Chair, Communications and Outreach Committee

American Educational Research Association

[earleholland](#) // Sep 10, 2009 at 4:07 pm

Paul:

Thanks for the feedback. Your point is well taken about researchers needing a basic skill set to discuss their work. And historically, that has been acquired during the graduate education process through guidance from mentors. But at best, the norm was barely a passing grade.

What the "science framers" advocate, however, is the kind of evangelism that takes considerable skill, and while some scientists clearly were born with the charisma to pull this off, most were not. It's unfair for researchers to be expected to walk naively and untrained into the clashes that often arise regarding science policy issues. Such "muggings" usually leave them convinced to never "go public" again!

A journalist-friend asked me the other day, when we discussed this topic, "Is it really so hard for them to learn how to communicate?" I responded, "I don't know — how hard would it be for you to learn how to do academic research?"

Earle

Skeptical // Mar 1, 2010 at 3:04 pm

Faculty are working 55-60 hours per week? Really?!

Take a walk through any department after 2 pm on a Thursday or all day Friday and tell me how many faculty members you find. Oh, yeah, I guess they're all doing "research" at home.

The biggest joke and dirtiest secret in higher ed is the supposedly overwhelming "workload" of faculty. So laughable...

[earleholland](#) // Mar 2, 2010 at 10:59 am

Skeptical: If you're one of those people who believe that work is only done when faculty are at their desks, then you'll never understand what faculty are supposed to do. Their job is to think and they're not limited to doing so while in their offices. Then there are committee meetings, seminars, research labs, consulting, advising, etc. Faculty don't punch time clocks! And we don't want them to.

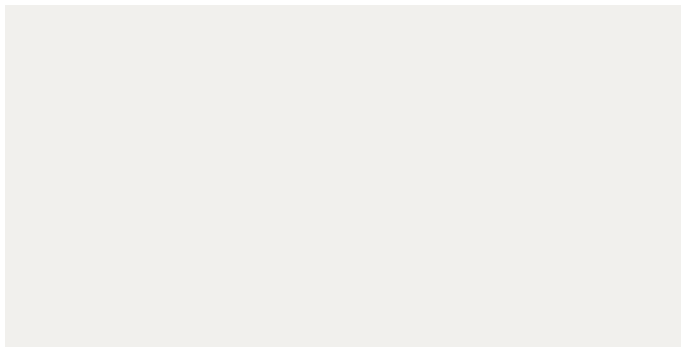
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