

# On Research...

Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



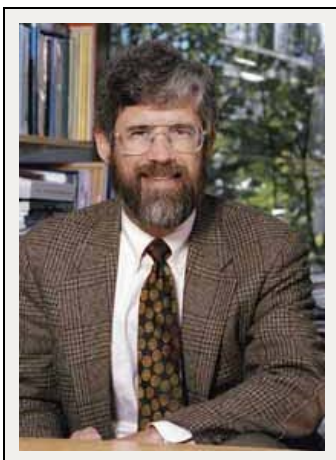
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## Holdren's wish . . .

Posted on February 22nd, 2009 by earlehollland

A friend and colleague, [Matt Nisbet](#), made an interesting point last week in his blog "[Framing Science](#)," pointing to statements by [John Holdren](#), President Obama's new science advisor.

Holdren, a past chair of the board of the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#) and a professor at the [Kennedy School of Government at Harvard](#), has been widely lauded as a great choice to provide counsel on science and technology.



Nisbet reminded readers of Holdren's recurring plea to scientists to get more involved in explaining science to both the public and to policy makers. Among his suggestions is one that researchers should "tithe" their time to this cause, that is, spending 10 percent of their professional time communicating about science.

No doubt, it's an admirable goal, but one that's hardly realistic for today's scientists.

First off, researchers today spend upwards of 40 percent of their available time just managing their projects, writing proposals for new studies, completing reports on existing ones, tracking budgets and such. That leaves barely three-fifths of their time for doing the actual science.

Moreover, there are the academic demands – university researchers are also teachers with students to instruct and mentor, and committees on which to serve. These requirements alone are enough to bring groans from most researchers.

Then there is their own need to stay current, to scour the literature in their discipline for the progress of peers, and attend conferences and meetings where new knowledge is shared, and where new ideas are born.

That alone would leave scant time for Holdren's 10 percent tithing for communication.

But that's not the real problem with his recommendation.

Holdren's wish requires that researchers be able to successfully communicate about their work. And the ugly truth is that many researchers aren't automatically good communicators. Formal communications within the

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scientific community requires an audience knowledgeable about the field and willing to work at learning new information. There's a conscious effort made by scientists when trading information.

It doesn't work that way with the public, much less policy makers. Collectively, the general public has a phobia about science, as well as an innate interest in it. Most people don't have the grounding necessary to understand the latest science advances. Nor do they have the attention span to invest in poor presentations of that information.

And scientists, generally, often misunderstand that informing the public and educating them are not the same, and the approach to succeed in one may differ from the other.



People are actually interested in science. They simply don't want to work at it. And they shouldn't have to. The wonder that can drive a researcher's efforts for decades differs little from that which excites us all. The difference is in the story-telling.

All too many of us believe that communications is simply telling people things we want them to know. We think that if we pelt the public with information that way that it will soak into the marrow of their minds. But in truth, when drenched from a downpour, we dry off, change clothes and quickly forget the discomfort.

All communicators, scientists included, need to understand who they are trying to reach, and not simply assume that since they value their own information, that others will as well. The key, some believe, is in building the bridge between what people are actually interested in and what communicators have to say. That requires work and, most importantly, attending more to what the listeners want to hear than what I might want to tell them.

In recent weeks, I've given talks to young reporters, to PhD science candidates and to student journalists, all about the challenges of science writing. In each case, actual communications occurred only when the listeners' interests guided the dialogue. People will expend near limitless effort to feed their curiosity and soak up knowledge.

If scientists remember that, and explain accordingly, they won't have to worry about tithing their time. \_\_Earle Holland



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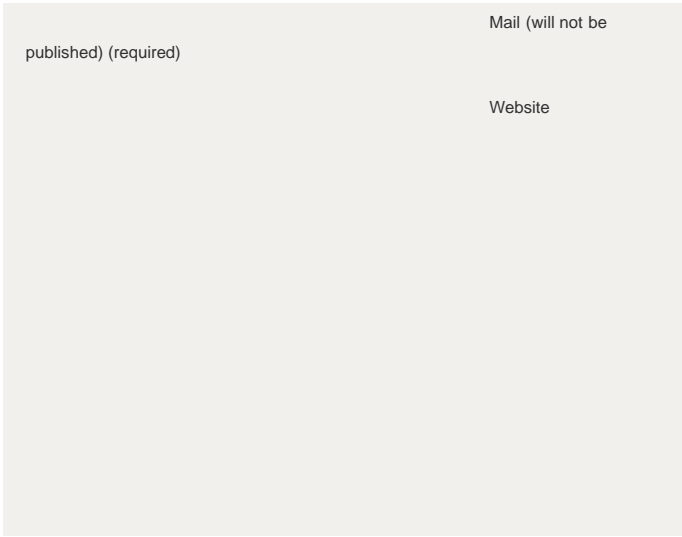
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