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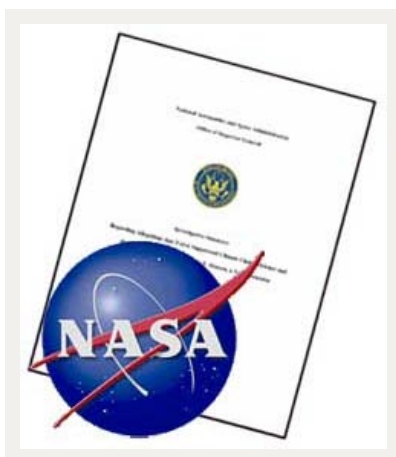
NASA's Convoluted Path . . .

Posted on June 12th, 2008 by earlehollland

I need to know the details.

Most people are satisfied with the 30-second news story about the latest federal report involving science — or the politics of science. Instead, I want to read the whole report, the gory details, the mountains of minutia that offer context instead of sound bites.

So when [NASA's Office of the Inspector General](#) last month issued its [two-year investigation](#) of whether the agency tried to squelch climate scientist [James Hansen](#) and others, I ran to the PDF on the web.



While major news media posted hundreds of stories on the web — I wanted to read the actual report!

Did [NASA Headquarters](#) staff try to insure that public information on climate change issues coming from the agency aligned with — or at least was not opposed to — current Bush Administration policies? The “sound bite” answer is yes. Agency staff did try to stymie opposing views and coverage, but the apparent pattern of actions seemed restricted to a few people in [NASA Headquarters' Office of Public Affairs](#).

But what fascinated me was the insight the report offered into the day-to-day process by which information flows from NASA through the news media and out to the public. NASA is superb in thrilling the public with “space news.” We're awed by what pours from the space agency — live video from the International Space Station or space shuttle, panoramas of the Martian landscape, or images of the births or deaths of stars — it's a feast.

But these are prepared packages, well-orchestrated to support NASA when budget hearings roll around. The science surrounding controversies like global climate change doesn't fit agency marketing nearly as well. And therein lay the problem.

At most research universities, staff science writers interview researchers, draft a story for the scientist's review, and then distribute it to the news media. It is a simple path involving only the essential players.

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But you need a roadmap to follow the cumbersome route NASA releases follow before making it to the news media. Scientists at a NASA center apparently write their own initial draft that then works its way through the center's local public affairs officer, and then past the scientist's two or three supervisors. After that, the draft release is shared with NASA's central public affairs officers where both career staff and political appointees adjudge the message and decide on how it is disseminated.

Envision a large committee making homemade soup.

The best science communications requires little more than an expert with passion and a story-teller with imagination. Complex hierarchies and cumbersome processes only complicate the issues.

NASA should know better. __Earle Holland

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[GarykPatton](#) // Jun 15, 2009 at 9:40 pm

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