On Research...

Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University

Some weeks, better than others . . .

Posted on March 31st, 2009 by earleholland

This past week hasn't been a good one for climate scientists, or so it seems:

- Along with giving mixed opinions on teaching evolution in its classrooms, the Texas State Board of Education approved standards that appear to question the validity of global warming. Their ruling both incorporated climate change into instruction and cast doubt on its severity and the role humans may play in it. The Board chair personally called humanity's impact on climate change "a bunch of hooey," news reports said.
- The conservative think tank, The Cato Institute, ran full-page ads in both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* in recent days opposing U.S. President Barak Obama's statement on climate change that "the science is beyond dispute and the facts are clear." The ad was endorsed by 115 supposed "experts," 89 percent of which listed their graduate degrees.
- Respected environmental reporter Andrew Revkin of the *New York Times* ran a weekend piece taking issue with some climate scientists' use – or perhaps overuse – of the term "tipping point" in suggesting that global climate change had progressed to a stage where it might not be halted. Revkin, routinely the sane voice in American climate reporting, asserted that the data simply wasn't there to prove that a tipping point had been reached.
- And teasing on the cover of the respected *New York Times Sunday Magazine* was the face of renowned physicist and writer Freeman Dyson, the subject of a lengthy story inside expounding on his disbelief in the seriousness of climate change warnings. While not a climate scientist himself, Dyson's doubts carry weight with the public because of his widespread popularity.

Taken together — or separately for that matter — a person hearing this news might understandably discount the concerns that many scientists have long raised about the planet's climate and move on to less stressful topics.

We Americans like things simple — good or bad, night or day, hot or cold,

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black or white . . . you get the picture. We appreciate easy answers and clear, straight paths.

Intellectually, we know that life is infinitely complex. But in our guts, we long for only one of two choices. We believe or disbelieve, support or oppose, accept or deny. The region between two polar positions appears just too murky, so we avoid it when we can.

And the daily inundation of information we receive adds to that natural craving for simplicity.

Just let us pick between two sweets – don't offer us the candy store!

This is all bad for science, as it is inherently complicated. In that convoluted murky world is where all the best questions lie, and science is nothing if not never-ending questions. That's why scientists have such trouble with issues of science policy and with communicating with the public.

By training, scientists want to neatly lay out the evidence leading from their research, complete with responses to arguments they predict opponents might offer, before offering their conclusions. In essence, they offer discourse.

The public simply doesn't have the patience, sad though that may be.

The solution, some argue, lies in what people are willing to hear, to tailor one's offerings to the interests of who is listening. Instead of addressing a vast controversy, target a specific argument.

Opponents of science – be they anti-evolutionists, animal rights' advocates, or climate change deniers – all use similar strategies, dancing from argument to argument across a broad issue, tossing out claims without documentation, and painting a perception of truth. All too often, scientists are seen running to catch up in such arguments, burdened by the time required to provide their evidence.

All flavors of deniers strive for the same thing – a semblance of knowledge and authority that can reinforce their arguments. Scientists already have that.

They just need to learn how to better use it.__*Earle Holland*

Tags: Climate change, Researchers, Science Communication, Science policy //

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than others . . . // Mar 31, 2009 at 6:49 pm

[...] Moreover Technologies – Environment news put an intriguing blog post on Some weeks, better than others . . .Here's a quick excerptThis past week hasn't been a good one for climate scientists, or so it seems: Along with giving mixed opinions on teaching evolution in its [...]

College Football Blogger // Apr 1, 2009 at 12:04 pm

I was just reading an article about how enormous salt lakes could have been the killer in one of our planet's mass extinctions. Apparently salt lakes send off toxic gasses into the atmosphere.

I wonder if this also contributes to climate change? There's no big salt lakes the size of Texas anymore that I am aware of, but are there enough salt lakes in the world that these toxic gasses might be posing some kind of problem? Anything we could do about it?

Also, in response to your post, the reason most people do not give science any credibility is because you are right- science is nothing but questions. The job of science is not to only answer its questions, but present solutions.

Example: Question- do humans have an impact on the climate of our planet? Research is performed, science says yes.

Only problem is….so what? What can we do about it? We seem to know that what we are doing is changing the climate and all, but all I ever read on websites and hear from science people is that they are sure humans are causing climate change. Fine, I can believe that and all, but what should we do about it? That's the part I never hear.

I honestly believe that if science presented less "answers" so to speak and more solutions, then it would help science a lot more.

earleholland // Apr 2, 2009 at 9:21 am

I think you have confused what science is with what technology is. Science is basically focused on uncerstanding, while technology uses knowledge acquired through science to provide solution. Obviously, you can't just focus on technology to the exclusion of science in an effort to just seek your solutions. Solutions don't come without understanding and that is one of the justifications for supporting science.
I differ with your idea that most people do not give science any credibility — Understanding science requires work and most people won't invest that effort after they leave school.__EMH

College Football Blogger // Apr 13, 2009 at 2:42 pm

earleholland-

I'm not a huge scientist, I mostly blog on college football. I do find an interest in science, and I have to say, what you said is one of the most profound statements I have ever read. I'm not exaggerating. Maybe I'm naive, but science vs. technology is something I had never thought of

before.

I think you put it very well. Science generates technology. Science says XYZ is happening or is possible or whatever, then technology steps in and tries to use XYZ to do something with the knowledge science provided.

So my question is, where is the disconnect here? Why is it with climate change we don't see a lot of technology developing to counter it or anything? Do scientists and engineers not get a long or something? I would think science and technology woudl then go hand in hand, is technology just slow in keeping up? Not enough funding? What do you think?

Paul Browne // Apr 28, 2009 at 8:40 am

With your comment "Opponents of science – be they anti-evolutionists, animal rights' advocates, or climate change deniers – all use similar strategies, dancing from argument to argument across a broad issue, tossing out claims without documentation, and painting a perception of truth. All too often, scientists are seen running to catch up in such arguments, burdened by the time required to provide their evidence."

A science blogger (might have been PZ Myers) put it more succenctly with a comment along the lines of "I'll always be at a disadvantage in public debates with opponents of science because I'm not allowed to just make stuff up"

I think that one of the factors that dissuades many scientists from engaging in public debate (probably more so than extremist threats and violence) is the certain knowledge that you will have to spend a lot of the debate debunking misleading claims made by your opponent rather than presenting the message you really want to get across. This isn't helped by the tendency of news media (both right and left leaning) to "balance" opinions, often creating a false balance between well supported and fringe viewpoints.

The only real answer is for far, far more scientists to get involved in science communication and in initiatives that show where the scientific community stands on issues. That way at least the general public will get a more accurate sense of where the scientific concensus lies, numbers do matter!

online games // Jun 19, 2009 at 3:08 am

The climatic conditions all over the world is changing I think that we should go in different approach about this change. I think that after some millions of years these conditions may occur.
Regards,

Mr. Cheap Laptops // May 18, 2010 at 4:12 am

Ah we just had the first Tornado in Serbia, it didn't do a lot damage, but heck we never had Tornadoes before. Sometimes the weather scares me, like it was snowing in the middle of Spring while a day ago we had

almost 25+*C

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