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Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



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We are what we read . . .

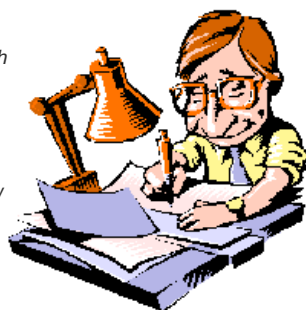
Posted on July 9th, 2009 by earleholland

Nothing's more pleasing to a writer than a note from a reader, especially one whose comment suggests an interest in dialogue. So when the following message came in, I figured it was good for our next offering:

Earle, I love to read your blog. Kind of a closet science junky... anyway, I wanted your take on something I saw on (a) political wire today:

"A new Pew Research report on American attitudes toward science finds that 55 percent of scientists identify as Democrats, while 32 percent identify as independents and just 6 percent say they are Republicans. When the leanings of independents are considered, fully 81 percent identify as Democrats or lean to the Democratic Party, compared with 12 percent who either identify as Republicans or lean toward the GOP."

Will this affect the type of research being done? i.e.: Too much research on climate change simply to make a political point? Not enough scientific innovation into oil exploration as Democrats are politically against new drilling mostly? This could make for an interesting blog post.



The poll this reader was referencing was one of the latest from the [Pew Research Center For The People & The Press](#) entitled "Scientific Achievements Less Prominent Than a Decade Ago: Public Praises Science; Scientists Fault Public, Media." So while our questioning reader was focusing on the political orientation of scientists from this report, the actual study looked at much broader issues.

There's certainly nothing wrong with any of us cherry-picking what interests us from a larger body of information. That's simply human nature and it's exacerbated by both the flood of information we encounter and the dwindling amount of time we have to spend on it – a point we've made in this blog a number of times before.

But things can get murky when you look a bit closer at what the reader referenced.

This latest Pew report runs more than 100 pages and covers topics such as the public's and scientists' views of the quality of American science, the interest of the public in scientific matters, science policy issues, funding and career paths for researchers.

The information on partisanship fills barely a single page.

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And yet that was the direction that this reader's attention was directed to by the "political wire" he referenced. Moreover, while the quote is an accurate lifting of verbiage within the report, it misses the point that of the scientists interviewed, almost one-third consider themselves as independents, meaning that they have no party affiliation or allegiance. And personally, adding in the "leanings," as the report did, to establish Democratic or Republican preferences just seems a bit too speculative for my taste.

But the reader asked whether such partisanship would influence the type of research that's being done, whether more climate change studies would be done to support a political view, or less oil exploration because of supposed Democratic opposition to that?

First off, I've never met a scientist who decided on a course of research because of political motivation – that simply doesn't happen except for perhaps the rarest fraction of cases where a scientist's intent is an aberration from the norm in research. People decide on what research to do based largely on the scientific questions they see as yet unanswered.

Secondly – and not to nitpick too much – oil exploration requires technology more than it does science. The techniques employed to locate potential new oil reserves are well-known and widely used. That's not going to be affected much by the political interests of scientists, regardless of whether they lean to the right or left. All of this does, however, connect nicely to a sad conclusion derived from some Ohio State research we reported on recently. The gist of the study is summed up nicely in the **story's lede**:

A new study provides some of the strongest evidence to date that Americans prefer to read political articles that agree with the opinions they already hold.

Researchers found that people spent 36 percent more time reading articles that agreed with their point of view than they did reading text that challenged their opinions.

As a people, we apparently now are fully accepting of limiting the information we encounter to that which reinforces our beliefs. And that's a sorry state for Americans to be in. In one of the most-developed – if not THE most-developed – country in the world, we're shying away from opposing views.

For scientists and researchers, whose worlds revolve around constantly increasing data, the public's comfortable acquiescence with limiting their information seems appalling. More importantly, it will make bridging the gap between science and the public all the harder. __Earle Holland

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RESEARCH NEWS WEBSITE



[Scotty Mack](#) // Jul 9, 2009 at 6:33 pm

Interesting points by both you and the reader.

I suspect that money also plays a part in what a scientist may choose to research. If funding for “global warming” research and experiments is much more readily available than money for creating a cleaner burning coal plant, it might influence what type of projects a scientist chooses to take on. Politics and money go hand in hand.

As for your point regarding many Americans getting their political news from sources that they agree with, I think it is only natural. We surround ourselves with those who have similar beliefs and interests in everything we do in life. We are insecure; we need to feel we are right and that we belong.

In addition to several websites, I also operate a very successful political blog. The majority of those commenting on my blog are from a different political view than mine. I welcome their input and appreciate the discourse. I have even changed my mind on an issue or two and have added retractions. When we stop learning, we stop living.

“It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.” ~ Harry S. Truman

[earleholland](#) // Jul 10, 2009 at 2:18 pm

Scotty:

There’s substantial mythology about scientists being broadly influenced by potential funding streams and, while it’s true that researchers need money to do their work, very, very few in academic circles will change research directions simply to follow the money. If they did, science would be weaving all over the place rather than doing a fairly good job of heading in the same direction.

The science surrounding global climate change — its causes and how we might impact it — is one of those areas where the situation is appealingly complex and offers a multitude of areas to investigate. That’s why scientists are focusing on it — not because of their political affiliations or inclinations. And as to your idea of work towards “creating a cleaner burning coal plant,” that’s more the purview of the engineer than it is the scientist.

Lastly, as to our affinity for like-minded information sources, it may well reflect our basic need to be liked, to share with others and various emotional human traits. The worlds of both journalism and of university research, however, revel in the diversity of information since those differences spur discussion and from that, potentially, can come solutions.

Earle

[Spanish Fork Mechanic](#) // Jul 10, 2009 at 4:29 pm

Wow Earle, thanks for posting my suggestion 😊

I enjoyed your point of view on this. It kind of relates to the recent media coverage of Michael Jackson. Is he getting all the coverage because the media loved him, or because it is what we as news consumers want to

see?

I think science is the opposite. Scientists don't have ratings to bother with. They can research what they please, regardless of whether we want them to or not. I'm sure there are scientists with hidden agendas out there trying to make political gains, but I'm doubting there are very many. Great post.

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