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## When data makes you blue . . .

Posted on August 20th, 2008 by earleholland

If I was seeking self-induced depression, I'd run to the [latest report](#) from the [Pew Research Center for the People & the Press](#), turn to page 39 in Section 5 and wallow in self-pity.

Truthfully, that's what I did and now life seems even bleaker than it did before.

Science writers are, by nature, science junkies. We know we're geeks and we don't mind it. We realize that our excitement over seemingly esoteric discoveries isn't shared by the masses. We pay attention to the Nobels and the Lasker Awards like others follow the Yankees or the Braves.



In fact, our disenfranchisement as social outliers sets us apart from others. In essence, it makes us special.

Couple that attitude with the ongoing deficit in scientific literacy among Americans. [NSF's](#) last edition (2006) of *Science and Engineering Indicators* painted a dismal picture of our national interest and/or knowledge in the sciences. While researchers rejoiced in the fact that scientific literacy has doubled in the US since 1979, it is still only 17 percent.

Or put another way, four out of five Americans are likely to give the wrong answer to a science question.

But back to page 39 . . .

If you scratch most journalists deep enough, they'll admit they believe that if the public could just be informed effectively, it would make intelligent decisions and then we would have a more informed citizenry, and a better society. Ergo, the public needs good journalism.

But the public's "wants" often differ from its "needs." And that's where the Pew study comes in. Its researchers surveyed more than 3,600 adults by telephone – both cellular and landline – and asked them a menu of questions to gauge how Americans viewed and used news. And part of their findings led to a ranking of "types of news (participants) followed very closely."

Leading the 18 categories was weather news (makes sense, who wants to forget the umbrella on a rainy day) with 48 percent ranking that as most

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important for them to monitor. Crime, education, community, environment, politics and Washington news rounded out the top six interest categories.

But ranked 14th out of 18 categories was "science and technology" with only 13 percent of those surveyed saying they followed it closely. Adding salt to the wound was the four-percentage-point drop in importance science received in the last six years of similar surveys. Those who closely followed science were mostly male – 71 percent to 29 percent.

There's only a little pleasure in knowing that, surprisingly, science outranked entertainment, culture and arts, celebrity news and travel in the polling.

Science journalists, and scientists as well, should take note of such surveys and think long and hard about why most people react to science as they do. The reasons are probably many but things can change. Those of us on this side of that divide need to do a better job of sharing our excitement in a way that's contagious to the masses, rather than seeing the data and simply getting depressed. *Earle Holland*

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