

Fred Spilhaus

Eos_fspilhaus@agu.org

Dear Mr. Spilhaus:

I know *EOS* does not take letters, but I offer this response to Susan Joy Hassol's excellent piece (Vol 89 No 11), and if you find it worthy, perhaps there is a place for it.

As former director of communications at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and a writer and editor who has worked in science and technology for more than 20 years, I applaud Susan Joy Hassol's summary of what scientists need to know in this time of rising demand for them to communicate accurately and clearly about climate change.

The piece brought to mind the old light bulb joke about psychiatrists: How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Just one — but the light bulb has to want to change.

Scientists have to want to communicate and in my experience their instinct is to run the other way. As Ms. Hassol noted, not only are there no incentives in the science community to communicate with nonscientists, there are deeply rooted disincentives, among them: the appearance of grandstanding, concern about being over-interpreted or misinterpreted, and concern about stepping out of their area of expertise—science itself—and being asked to comment on areas afield, namely, science policy and public policy. At the bottom, reticence about communicating to the public – especially via the lay press – is rooted in concern for risking those three most important currencies in science: esteem from scientific colleagues, assurance of funding, and, for young scientists, tenure. As one fairly senior (tenured) scientist put it to me: “How will my being quoted in the Science Section of The New York Times help me get funding or published?” To him, and to many scientists on soft money, the certain risks far outweigh any uncertain benefits. Communicating with the public does not clearly help advance science, and is like traveling to a developing country: messy, risky, time-consuming and everyone speaks a language you don't understand.

I see the only two ways for “the light bulb to want to change.” The first is to integrate communications into science training, starting at the undergraduate level, so that it becomes as natural as Monte Carlo simulations or chi-square analysis. The second is to engage scientist communicators as communications advocates. The last people scientists will trust are professional communicators.