At the January American Meteorological Society meeting and the February Front Range meeting of the American Geophysical Union, I participated in panel discussions of science, ethics, and the media. In each of these sessions, I argued that scientists have the responsibility to provide sound, useful scientific information to the public, largely through the media. My position is based on the conviction that as environmental problems continue to threaten the health and welfare of society, public understanding of the social and scientific causes of environmental degradation becomes increasingly important. I also believe that a public that is knowledgeable about science and the tradeoffs and risks associated with technologic advances is more apt to make wise decisions and to be willing to accept costs and other sacrifices likely to be associated with difficult political and economic choices.

A 1993 Harris poll provides evidence that the public is interested in and receptive to such communications from scientists. For example, approximately four out of every ten adults actively pursue serious science news, and a majority of those surveyed consider science news to be as important as other major news topics, including crime, the economy, sports, politics, and entertainment. In addition, the poll showed that interest in science cuts across all demographic groups, whether sorted by age, gender, education, or income level.

At the same time, another 1993 survey, by American Opinion Research, indicated that a majority of reporters and newsmen and television supervisors say it is difficult to find experts who speak plain English rather than jargon, or experts who are not biased toward either environmental activism or business. About 50% of these media supervisors are able to define CFCs, compared to 39% of all adults.

What do these polls mean? In my opinion, they indicate that the ground for further scientific education of the public is fertile. People want science news, they are fully capable of appreciating it, and the deliverers of the news are eager and able to present it well. So, what are the responsibilities of scientists? I believe scientists have an ethical obligation to account to the public for research results achieved through public support, and, further, to do something “right” about environmental problems as opposed to doing nothing wrong. Unless reputable scientists supply accurate information to the media, and unless the media publish the information in a responsible manner, the public is at a disadvantage when it comes to making wise choices about matters related to the environment.

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