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Successful Science Communication

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Review

Bennett, D. & Jennings, R. (Eds.). (2011). *Successful Science Communication, Telling It Like It Is*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 978-0-521-17678-1

If Galileo were a scientist today he would probably be a blogger and have a Twitter account. Wisdom communicated down from mountain tops and ivory towers no longer cuts it for 21st-century science. Today's successful scientists and science communicators reach out, network, go on TV, create podcasts, guest on talk radio, and have a website, a LinkedIn profile, a Facebook page, and a Twitter account. They are your neighbour, the guy next to you on the bus, the soccer mom you cheer with as your kids play. They are tuned in, plugged in, multi-taskers and more communications savvy than ever before. Such is the contention of editors David J. Bennett and Richard C. Jennings in this must-have collection of essays for scientists who, love it or hate it, have to broaden their outreach and connect with people outside their peer group and outside their comfort zone. Not a scientist? No problem. This book is equally useful to professional communicators, educators, researchers, policy makers, and students alike.

Subtitled *Telling It Like It Is* Bennett and Jennings have assembled a diverse collection of straight-talking essays from a broad spectrum of communicators of science such as academic authors but also from the industry and media. Written in a practical, readable style and all well-researched and well thought out, we are presented with history of scientific communication but also a handbook for those who could use a primer or those who are new to the communications game.

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The authors contend the public understanding of science is at stake which, increasingly, is also the primary driver behind the success or failure of political and commercial pressures that affect change that improves not only human life but all life. Scientists can talk among themselves all they like but if your science is not getting out to the masses, you or your institution or agency or business could lose prestige, or funding, or worse.

This book contains 27 short essays in four sections and all thread off, more or less, from the Royal Society's *Bodmer Report* of 1985. Most of the authors and discussions are located in the UK but that hardly matters. The concerns and advice are global. The authors are agreed that what worked decades ago, no longer works well today. The skillful communication of science is vital to the modern scientist and connecting with consumers of science be they peers, media, or laypersons, has never before been so easy. That is not without its caveats but science communicators must be bold, they say, to advance the cause and to defend it *everywhere*. The Internet is Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. It is chock-a-block with bad information but somebody has to set the records straight and that somebody is *you*. Misinformed journalists are a problem but there are also people – professional and not – with agendas to push and often a lot of money at stake to keep pushing nonsense that harms science but also potentially imperils our very existence (i.e. climate change).

“The fruits of science are often sweet, but sometimes they are bitter,” writes Jennings in his chapter “Science: truth and ethics.” Science has given us wonderful things but also terrible things that scare people. Trust in science – and scientists – is at risk. People do not quite know who to trust any more. Bad information is everywhere and the reputation of science has been suffering because of it. Now, it is time to turn the tide. The authors urge science communicators to reclaim their ground and up their game but also lay the foundations for a new generation of science communicators to change the discourse by standing firm on truth, cultivating trust, and maybe put a bit of sizzle on the steak but not too much. Science must be kept interesting and scientists must be approachable. This, the authors feel, is becoming the norm but insist it must continue and thrive if science is to remain

credible to the people that both foot the bill and those who also elect makers of policy.

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