

THE MORAL LIBERAL

You Ought to Have a Look: Curry on Worry

By Patrick J. Michaels & Paul C. “Chip” Knappenberger

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This week, we have two notable items of interest.

First and foremost, a must-read article from Judith Curry’s Climate Etc. blog where Judy quite adeptly introduces us to the concept of an “availability cascade”—a process that has come to dominate and define climate alarmism. Curry writes that an

availability cascade is a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation that triggers a self-perpetuating chain reaction: the more attention a danger gets, the more worried people become, leading to more news coverage and greater alarm.

She describes how the cascade of events began with the 1992 United Nations Rio Treaty aimed at “avoiding dangerous climate change through stabilization of [carbon dioxide] emissions,” transformed from “global warming” to “climate change” so as to pick up extreme weather events, and now has swept human health into the growing avalanche of woe.

Judy’s article is one of the best pieces we have read on the web in recent weeks (and we’re not just saying that because she incorporates some of our work!). Bravo to her! Here is a longer excerpt, but you (really, really) ought to have a look at the whole thing:

Climate change may exacerbate environmental problems that are caused by overpopulation, poorly planned land-use and over-exploitation of natural resources. However, for the most part it is very difficult to separate out the impacts of human caused climate change from natural climate change and from other societal impacts. Nevertheless, climate change has become a grand narrative in which human-caused climate change has become a dominant cause of societal problems. Everything that goes wrong then reinforces the conviction that that there is only one thing we can do prevent societal problems—stop burning fossil fuels. This grand narrative misleads us to think that if we solve the problem of climate change, then these other problems would also be solved.

Politicians, activists and journalists have stimulated an ‘availability cascade’ [link] to support alarm about human-caused climate change. An availability cascade is a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation that triggers a self-perpetuating chain reaction: the more attention a danger gets, the more worried people become, leading to more news coverage and greater alarm. Because slowly increasing temperatures don’t seem alarming, the ‘availability entrepreneurs’ push extreme weather events and public health impacts as being caused by human-caused

climate change, more of which is in store if we don't quickly act to cool the planet by reducing fossil fuel emissions.

... The availability cascade of climate change as apocalypse acts to narrow the viewpoints and policy options that we are willing to consider in dealing with complex issues such as public health, weather disasters and national security. Should we be surprised when reducing [carbon dioxide] emissions does not ameliorate any of these problems?

The other piece worth checking out this week appeared on the site *The Conversation* and was authored by Ivan Oransky, one of the founders of Retraction Watch, a site that “tracks retractions as a window in the scientific process.”

Oransky examines the question, “is science really better than journalism at self-correction?” The recent *Rolling Stone* retraction of an “incendiary article about an alleged gang rape on the campus of the University of Virginia” has some suggesting that “journalism should be more like science” in employing a “journalistic method” much like the “scientific method,” which involves rigorous hypothesis testing. Oransky, however, thinks that science—perhaps increasingly—is failing to live up to that ideal. He writes:

The problem is that in science—or, more accurately, scientific publishing—this process seldom works as directed.

... Just as a good narrative sells in the media, a compelling storyline carries outsize weight in science. Journals are more likely to publish positive findings than negative results. And as emerging scholarship shows, it's not unusual to publish studies that simply are not true. That's confirmation bias at work again, aided and abetted by the way many scientists use statistics. Simply put, if you do 20 experiments, one of them is likely to have a publishable result. But only publishing that result doesn't make your findings valid. In fact it's quite the opposite.

Why does this happen? Because the entire scientific community, from the junior researchers to the editors-in-chief, are vulnerable to the same sort of credulity from which *Rolling Stone's* editors suffered, which is a particular form of confirmation bias.

At the Center for the Study of Science, we have taken this a step further and we stress how this positive finding publication bias can misshape and misdirect scientific knowledge. It's worth checking out both Oransky's full article and our explanations of the bigger implications. Also, the Retraction Watch website is worth bookmarking and stopping by on occasion to see the types of things that have led to papers being retracted from the scientific literature. It is rather eye-opening to see all that goes on.

As always, you ought to have a look!

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