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Debate the controversy!

Posted By [Joe](#) On March 8, 2010 @ 1:22 pm In [Media](#) | [60 Comments](#)

The serial misinformers and misrepresenters demand equal time for their misinformation and misrepresentations. What should climate science defenders and the media do?

Here's how the strategy works:

Step 1: Some misinformer or anti-science group puts out misinformation on the science or misrepresents the views of some scientist or expert.

Step 2: They get debunked, by that person and/or others.

Step 3: They demand equal time for their misinformation or misrepresentation, either through formal debates or "balanced" media coverage.

Step 4: If they get the equal time, their strategy has worked, and they can go on to fabricate more misinformation and misrepresent the views of other scientists. If not, they simply attack those who fail to give them equal time or debate them as being biased or scared.

Step 5: Go back to Step 1.

This strategy started in earnest with the anti-science disinformation from the tobacco industry, as [Naomi Oreskes explains in her recent talk and forthcoming book, *Merchants of Doubt*](#) ^[1]. The creationists (who morphed into the intelligent designers) brought this to a new level with their "[Teach the Controversy](#)" ^[2] campaign:

Teach the Controversy is the name of a Discovery Institute campaign to promote intelligent design, a variant of traditional creationism, while attempting to discredit evolution in United States public high school science courses. The central claim the Discovery Institute makes with 'Teach the Controversy' is that fairness and equal time requires educating students with a "critical analysis of evolution" where "the full range of scientific views," evolution's "unresolved issues," and the "scientific weaknesses of evolutionary theory" will be presented and evaluated alongside intelligent design concepts

It's a good strategy for spreading misinformation since it seems on the surface to be fair-minded: Equal time (for our misinformation)!

This strategy has certainly worked with the media (see [Boykoff on "Exaggerating Denialism: Media Representations of Outlier Views on Climate Change"](#): [Freudenburg: "Reporters need to learn that, if they wish to discuss 'both sides' of the climate issue, the scientifically legitimate "other side" is that, if anything, global climate disruption is likely to be significantly worse than has been suggested in scientific consensus estimates to date"](#) ^[3]).

So what should individuals do and what should the media do? Let's start with the former.

Debate the controversy!

To paraphrase [Juan Cole's advice to climate scientists on how to avoid being Swift-boated](#) ^[4], any debate or broadcast that pits a serial misinformer or misrepresenter against someone defending climate science is automatically a win for the misinformer, "**since a false position is being given equal time and legitimacy.**"

That's why 99% of the articles or blog posts you read by people demanding some climate science defender debate someone are by other serial misinformers.

Try [googling "Why Won't Al Gore Debate"](#) ^[5] – in quotation marks. There are a staggering 129,000 (!) results. Number one is ... [Heartland.org](#) ^[6]. On the front page alone, you've got the Cato Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, OpenMarket.org ("Free Markets & Limited

Government”), among other anti-science conservatives. The total results read like a who’s who of disinformers: Climatescam, Rightwingnews, Newsbusters, FreeRepublic...

Indeed, I’m going to update [Diagnosing a victim of anti-science syndrome \(ASS\)](#) ^[7] to add “demanding someone who defends climate science debate a serial misinformer or misrep resenter” as one of the diagnostic indicators. It appears to correlate better than many of the other symptoms. If you read a blog post by someone making that demand, probably 98 times out of 100 they’re going to be a misinformer.

The only climate science defender I saw who even made the first results page was the redoubtable [Greenfyre](#) ^[8], who writes [The best climate blog you aren’t reading](#) ^[9]. He of course was taking the reverse position, explaining the reason why Gore shouldn’t debate:

Simple, the Deniers would win ... because they have no evidence or facts on their side.

Huh? If they have no evidence or facts, how can they win a debate?

Easy, because a debate is not about being right, it is about winning by appearing to be right. The more the audience does not understand the issue, the easier it is to win. You just need one thing, it’s called [“the Gish Gallop.”](#) ^[10]

As RationalWiki [explains](#) ^[11]:

Named for creationism activist and professional debater Duane Gish, the **Gish Gallop** is an informal name for a rhetorical technique in debates that involves drowning the opponent in half-truths, lies, straw men, and bullshit to such a degree that the opponent cannot possibly answer every falsehood that has been raised, usually resulting in many involuntary twitches in frustration as the opponent struggles to decide where to start.

It is often used as an indirect argument from authority, as it often appears to paint the “galloper” as an expert in a broad range of subjects and the opponent as an incompetent bumbler who didn’t do their homework before the debate. (Such emphasis on style over substance is why many scientists disdain public debates as a forum for disseminating opinions.)

Greenfyre makes the point I’ve made many times here, that the person debating the galloper, aka the serial misinformer and misrepresenter “is then stuck using his time to either”:

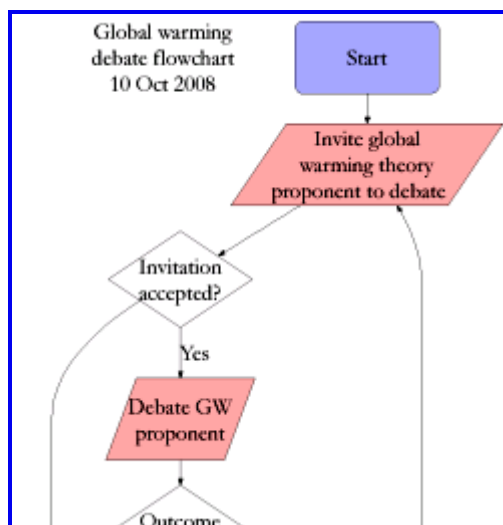
- i) Simply state each lie is a lie, one for one, in which case it becomes his word/my word;
- ii) Refuting the lies with facts and data, but of course refuting nonsense takes longer than saying it, so he might cover 1 point in 5, which leaves the impression that he had no answer for 4/5 points;
- iii) Try to make his own points, in which case it can seem that he had no answer to any of the points you made.

No matter what he chooses, he uses up all of his time and the best he can do is seem to make it 50/50

^[12]This is probably the main reason I haven’t engaged in traditional debates for a long time now. Contrary to what you may have heard, I haven’t actually been asked by any independent organization to do a traditional (i.e. staged) 1-on-1 debate in a while. I would say no.

A conservative media outlet did ask me to make a presentation following a well-known disinformers at a conference they were sponsoring, but I insisted that they be serial presentations. I have done a few team debates, though not recently, and I became even more disenchanted with them (see [“the idiocy of \(crowded\) debates](#) ^[13]”). NASA’s Gavin Schmidt himself [noted](#) ^[14], “So are such debates worthwhile? On balance, I’d probably answer no (regardless of the outcome).”

Greenfyre’s post links to another great post, [“Waah, they](#)



[won't debate us II](#) ^[15] (from the "International Journal of Inactivism of debate") the source of this flowchart.

There is a particularly absurd notion floating around the anti-science-osphere that because you debunk someone at length that means you have to then give them equal time in a formal debate to go back and repeat their misinformation and misrepresentations. Debunkings are necessarily long, as Greenfyre explains:

To a limited extent the Gish Gallop works in the blogosphere as well, and for similar reasons. It take only 3 to 5 paragraphs to pack in a lot of nonsense, at least as many pages to thoroughly expose it for nonsense. In a world where people skim rather than read that will tend to have the same effect as running out of time, except you run out of reader attention instead.

It's precisely because someone has to be debunked at length that you don't want to give them more equal time if you can help it. Duh!

In the past 4 months since the stolen emails story broke and climate science has been under its most intense assault in years, I've spent more time than I'd like debunking the misinformers and defending climate scientists from misrepresentation. The person I've critiqued at length the most number of times is [The Viscount Monckton of Brencley](#) ^[16] ([TVMOB](#) ^[17]). He's been mentioned in about 11 posts, of which maybe half are serious critiques [*note to people who use my search engine for counting how many times I have written about you -- it doesn't work well for that purpose*].

Now TVMOB has wormed his way into the *New York Times*, which would make him a "credible" source by some folks' standards, I suppose (see "[N.Y. Times and Elisabeth Rosenthal Face Credibility Siege over Unbalanced Climate Coverage](#)" ^[18]). But I certainly wouldn't debate him. His rhetoric alone has delegitimized him (see [TVMOB hate speech shocker: Lord Monckton repeats and expands on his charge that those who embrace climate science are "Hitler youth" and fascists](#) ^[17] and [Lord Monckton meltdown: "I'm not going to shake the hands of Hitler youth"](#) ^[16]).

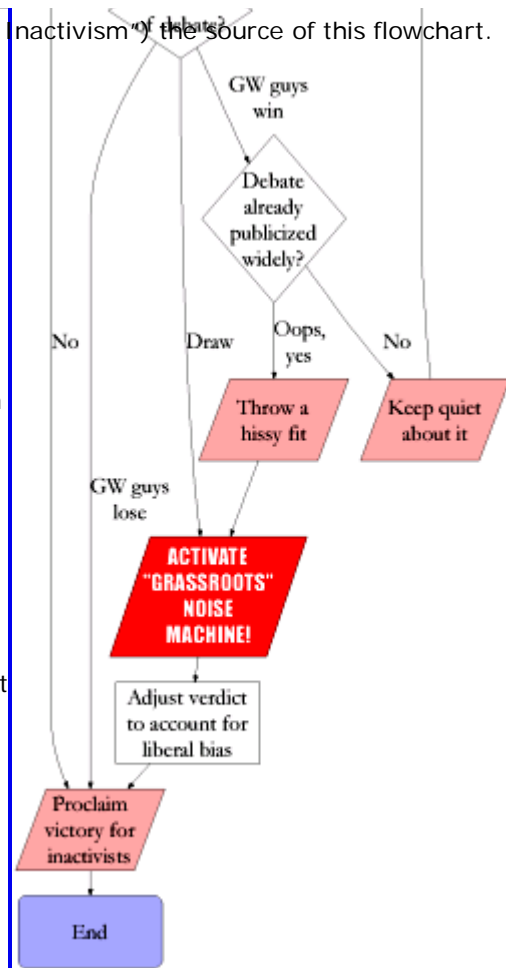
So formal debates make little sense, and it's easy to say no to them. If other climate science defenders want to do them, that is their business.

What about those staged mini-debates media outlets do on their own shows? Those are quite different. I'm still not a fan of them, but if Neil Cavuto wants to talk to me on his FoxNews show, well, he's already got the platform and he's giving me a shot at his big audience. That's not to say I would do every TV show.

I did a radio mini-debate recently. The producer had insisted to me that it was not going to be a mini-debate, but that's what turned into. These may be unavoidable as I do more media in the future, but again I don't think I'll do every one that comes along.

Finally, I think some people, like Monckton, are beyond the pale and one should avoid giving them any legitimacy even in these media mini-debates. Certainly if someone has personally misrepresented you and/or spread misinformation about you, then I think you should probably avoid being on the same show as them if you can. It's true that I ended up breaking that rule once in the last year. It only happened because I was filling in for a colleague who had to cancel suddenly. That misinformers isn't a great debater but of course he repeatedly misrepresented my position and used the Gish Gallop and so it was not productive. I will endeavor to avoid those situations in the future.

In Part 2 I will discuss the issue of the media's complicity in the unbalanced coverage and what might be done.



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URL to article: <http://climateprogress.org/2010/03/08/global-warming-science-debates-teach-the-controversy/>

URLs in this post:

- [1] Naomi Oreskes explains in her recent talk and forthcoming book, *Merchants of Doubt*: <http://climateprogress.org/2010/03/07/naomi-oreskes-book-talk-merchants-of-doubt-how-a-handful-of-scientists-obscure-the-truth-about-climate-change/>
- [2] Teach the Controversy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teach_the_Controversy
- [3] Boykoff on "Exaggerating Denialism: Media Representations of Outlier Views on Climate Change": Freudenburg: "Reporters need to learn that, if they wish to discuss 'both sides' of the climate issue, the scientifically legitimate "other side" is that, if anything, global climate disruption is likely to be significantly worse than has been suggested in scientific consensus estimates to date": <http://climateprogress.org/2010/02/25/max-boykoff-media-balance-deniers-contrarian-climate-change/>
- [4] Juan Cole's advice to climate scientists on how to avoid being Swift-boated: <http://climateprogress.org/2010/03/03/juan-coles-advice-to-climate-scientists-on-how-to-avoid-being-swift-boated/>
- [5] googling "Why Won't Al Gore Debate" : <http://www.google.com/search?q=%22Why+Won%27t+Al+Gore+Debate%22+%ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a>
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- [7] Diagnosing a victim of anti-science syndrome (ASS): <http://climateprogress.org/2009/01/05/anthony-watts-up-with-that-anti-science-denier-website-weblog-awards/>
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- [17] TVMOB: <http://climateprogress.org/2009/12/12/tvmob-hate-speech-lord-monckton-hitler-youth-fascist-climate-activists/>
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