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[Is Our Scientists Learning?](#)



by [Sheril Kirshenbaum](#)

In my talks, I often discuss the different groups who came to meet with me when I worked on Capitol Hill with regard to who was most effective. On science related issues, the general breakdown fell into two categories (with exceptions):

1. Scientists from universities or NGO's would usually show up in my office with a briefing binder as thick as a phone book. There would be a lot of charts, p-values, figures, and complicated concepts. Most didn't talk to me, but *at* me. And the take home message would be different than that of the other scientists I met the previous hour on the same subject.
2. Special interest groups were frequently very well organized. They spoke with a common theme and brought articulate speakers. Rather than stop in our office, they usually hosted large and well attended

briefings, supplying easy to digest hardcover books with titles like ‘climate change conspiracy.’ Typically they were funny and made references to Michael Crichton’s science fiction. Perhaps most importantly, they provided a free boxed lunches and held long Q&As to engage the audience.

Both types introduced themselves as the “honest broker” of scientific information, but the latter often made the stronger impression with staffers. Now removed from the Hill for several years, this invitation recently landed in my inbox:

The Climategate Scandals: What Has Been Revealed And What Does It Mean?

Featuring

Pat Michaels

Senior Fellow in Environmental Studies, Cato Institute

&

Joseph D’Aleo

Executive Director, ICECAP and Certified Consultant Meteorologist

Hosted by:

Ben Lieberman

Senior Policy Analyst

The Heritage Foundation

&

Myron Ebell

Director of Energy and Global Warming Policy

The Competitive Enterprise Institute

The scientific case for catastrophic global warming was already showing signs of weakening when the Climategate scientific fraud scandal broke in November of 2009. This release of thousands of computer files and emails between leading global warming scientists showed evidence of data manipulation, flouting of freedom of information laws, and attempts to suppress publication of research that disagreed with the alarmist “consensus.”

Climategate has raised many questions about the reliability of key temperature records as well as the objectivity of the researchers and institutions involved, but it is far from the only global warming-related controversy. It has been followed by revelations that some of the most attention-grabbing claims in the 2007 UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report – the supposed gold standard of climate science – were simply made up. Before laws regulating energy use are enacted that could well cost trillions of dollars, it is crucial to understand the extent to which the alleged scientific consensus supporting global warming alarmism has been discredited by these scandals. Join us for a discussion featuring two scientists who have closely studied climategate.

Lunch will be provided

I’ve reposted the text because I don’t think most scientists understand the way policy decisions are influenced. We may have a more scientific Washington than when I worked in DC, but science and its allies must fight harder than ever before. Some [groups](#) are already effective. Some of us are [trying new initiatives](#). I’m optimistic and realize that change happens slowly, but I hope those working in policy-related areas will take note and become more involved making sure that sound science moves beyond the lab. Because when we’re not explaining what we do and why it matters, someone else is telling the story for us. And we often won’t like the result.

April 15th, 2010 11:37 AM Tags: [capitol hill](#), [climate change](#), [climategate](#), [Heritage Foundation](#) in [Politics and Science](#) | 15 comments | [RSS feed](#) | [Trackback >](#)

15 Responses to “Is Our Scientists Learning?”

1. 1. *John* Says:

[April 15th, 2010 at 11:51 am](#)

Most of us don't see these briefings and assume if we're being funded, things are okay. Which they clearly are not.

2. 2. *Amos Zeeberg (Discover Web Editor) Says:*

[April 15th, 2010 at 12:02 pm](#)

Alarming. Have you seen any particularly well-run efforts to get good climate science to policymakers? I would've guessed that some of the enviro groups would have figured this out by now.

3. 3. *Prof Mike Says:*

[April 15th, 2010 at 12:04 pm](#)

Does it really matter what the politicians think? I don't really care if they vote one way or the other, as long as I still get my grant money to study the issue.

4. 4. *Sheril Kirshenbaum Says:*

[April 15th, 2010 at 12:15 pm](#)

@2 Amos,

There are a lot of efforts to improve science communication in policy and some scientists are great communicators. But I think a large part of the problem lies in the competitive nature of initiatives, particularly when it comes to funding. Everyone wants to carve out their niche so they do not share information and there are a lot of wasted resources and overlapping efforts with different messages—the result being, unfortunately, a lot of noise.

@3 Prof Mike,

Exactly. And policy suffers, along with all of us eventually.

5. 5. *David Says:*

[April 15th, 2010 at 12:36 pm](#)

Chris:

Very well phrased. The only thing I think you left out is that the ones bringing the lunches for these talks are generally the more acceptable ones.

A well-prepped, good speaker with a box lunch is pretty well remembered.

The ones that fly them out to a retreat, vacation, golf outing, contribute to their campaigns, give their friends jobs, et cetera, are their real best friends.

(I left out the even worse abuses to maintain at least a bit of dignity.)

Unfortunately, there are very few politicians who even understand the issues. It goes way beyond just one point of debate such as global warming. It is pervasive. If you want someone who understands people, the politicians are the first place to look. If you want someone who understands science, they are the probably the last you would want to look.

They have “proclaimed experts” on both sides of a debate that they really don't even understand. They both come from prestigious groups. They both are telling them contradictory things. When it comes down to a vote on a topic, about the only thing that they have to go on is their political advisers who tell them at that particular vote, go with the one that will drive them down in the polls the least.

If you want to gain mindshare in getting your agenda enacted, you have to do it through getting voters and not trying to convince politicians. The other side is doing it and they will win if you don't get more voters on your side.

The only real ways to get politicians attention is through big blocks of voters or lots of money.

6. 6. [Josh](#) Says:

[April 15th, 2010 at 12:37 pm](#)

Are? I'm sorry to not be commenting on the content of the article but there is something about that "Is" in the title that is rubbing me the wrong way.

7. 7. [Prof Mike](#) Says:

[April 15th, 2010 at 12:39 pm](#)

@4 Sheril

Who's policy suffers? My policy is to get as much funding as possible to survive. We're not all Michael Mann's and Phil Jones with the publicity and money that comes with it.

I've found that more controversy and more skeptics has made for more research money. If the public thought the science really was settled, why would they be paying for yet another study, another climate conference or another political body to manage the hype?

Look what happened with the CFCs. There was plenty of research money for it until the politicians aligned and addressed it globally. The result was a decimation of those studying it as the issue faded from the public eye.

8. 8. [Sheril Kirshenbaum](#) Says:

[April 15th, 2010 at 12:42 pm](#)

@5 David

I'd like to see some kind of effective science PAC like [ocean champions](#) emerge. And my name's Sheril, not Chris.

@6 Josh

Reference to [Bushism #3](#)

9. 9. [David](#) Says:

[April 15th, 2010 at 12:43 pm](#)

Josh, it is a literary technique which makes a point through incorrect grammar.

10. 10. [David](#) Says:

[April 15th, 2010 at 12:59 pm](#)

Sheril:

Regarding my overlooking the byline: My mind was elsewhere, please accept my abject apologies.

PAC's are good for one topic but overall it is a general ignorance on the part of the politicians. As soon as someone makes a fuss that will politically embarrass them, they cower and vote to maintain their position regardless of right or wrong. They also all have to toe the party line. If you want a real voice you must get influence with *BOTH* parties, otherwise, you get treated as a partisan issue and it flip flops between whichever party is in power. Every election it is, "Two steps forward. Two steps back."

As long as science (in this context environmental science) is treated as a Democratic issue, it will be treated as a second rate issue. It is not in the other party's platform. It will remain a partisan issue. The people you need to convert are on the other side of the aisle.

11. 11. [Jinchi](#) Says:

[April 15th, 2010 at 5:53 pm](#)

Are? I'm sorry to not be commenting on the content of the article but there is something about that

“Is” in the title that is rubbing me the wrong way.

It’s a pretty clear reference to George Bush’s quote “Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?”.

12. 12. [Hunter Cutting](#) Says:
[April 15th, 2010 at 6:07 pm](#)

One new initiative that has been launched is the Project on Climate Science, a collaborative NGO effort to proactively defend and promote science.

<http://www.projectonclimatescience.com>

13. 13. [Nullius in Verba](#) Says:
[April 15th, 2010 at 7:02 pm](#)

“I’ve reposted the text because I don’t think most scientists understand the way policy decisions are influenced.”

AGW-supporting scientists know perfectly well. Stephen Schneider said it very clearly:

On the one hand, as scientists we are ethically bound to the scientific method, in effect promising to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but – which means that we must include all doubts, the caveats, the ifs, ands and buts. On the other hand, we are not just scientists but human beings as well. And like most people we’d like to see the world a better place, which in this context translates into our working to reduce the risk of potentially disastrous climate change. To do that we need to get some broad based support, to capture the public’s imagination. That, of course, means getting loads of media coverage. So we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified, dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we might have. This “double ethical bind” we frequently find ourselves in cannot be solved by any formula. Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest. I hope that means being both.

But if it doesn’t...

14. 14. [Gus Snarp](#) Says:
[April 16th, 2010 at 8:14 am](#)

@ProfMike – Are you in the least serious, or are you just trying to paint the picture of the scientist who only cares about money, you know the false stereotype that all sorts of anti-science types believe in.

15. 15. [Gaythia](#) Says:
[April 16th, 2010 at 10:30 am](#)

If researchers care about money, they need to remember that federal funding depends on votes in Congress and how well that funding is allocated and administered by the Executive branch of the Federal government.

How Congress votes and how the President acts depend on who gets elected. Thus it is very important to our democracy that we have an educated, informed populace. Over time, this can only be done by honest discussion of real issues. Unfortunately, in the current politically charged atmosphere, this means that a considerable amount of time has to be spent refuting spurious charges by wealthy special interests.

It is not always true that science is a strictly partisan issue. The EPA was founded during the Nixon administration, with both the President’s support and that of Democratic Congressional leaders such as Senator Gaylord Nelson.

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Chris Mooney is a 2009-2010 [Knight Science Journalism Fellow](#) at MIT, host of the [Point of Inquiry podcast](#), and the author of three books, [The Republican War on Science](#), [Storm World](#), and [Unscientific America](#). For more information see his [bio](#) and [events](#).

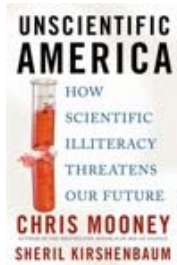
Sheril Kirshenbaum is author of [The Science of Kissing](#) and [Unscientific America](#). Sometimes she's a classicist, radio jock, or congressional staffer. For more information, visit her [website](#).

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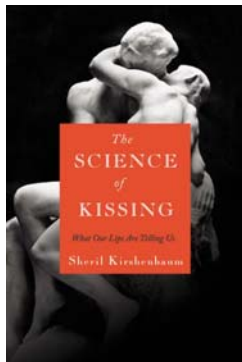
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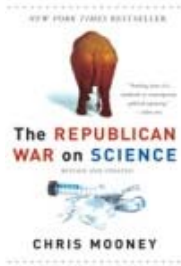


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