

# The campaign to sell climate denial: public relations, the media and scientists

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ABSTRACT

As with many public debates, the debate on climate change has a number of participants whose activities are influential, secretive and unethical. In the climate change debate, some fossil fuel corporations have funded apparently unrelated bodies which claim to have some scientific expertise or which claim to represent citizens' interests. The purpose of this activity is to provide sources of commentary which can be cited in media coverage. This paper examines three ways in which public debate and news coverage on climate change are shaped by the activities of climate change deniers in cooperation with fossil fuel companies.

**Key words:** climate change, science communication, climate denial, mass media, public relations, fairness, distortion

## 'Doubt is our product'

In August 2008 I wrote an article on the tactics of the deniers of climate change for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* newspapers. The *Sydney Morning Herald* headed the article 'The climate change smokescreen'. It used the word 'smokescreen' because I began the article by comparing the behaviour of tobacco companies to those of fossil fuel companies. Long after the medical evidence established the many bad effects of tobacco smoking, the companies that produced cigarettes were still running an elaborate public relations campaign defending their product.

Their aim was not to convince anyone that tobacco was harmless. Rather, in the words of one internal company memo 'our product is doubt'. In the space allowed by doubt people would keep buying tobacco and the company's profits would continue.

The case of the fossil fuel companies is similar. Their product is doubt. My newspaper article pointed out that the giant oil firm Exxon-Mobil had given millions of dollars to many obscure bodies to promote this campaign. The campaign was effective from the level of everyday public opinion right up to the White House and Congress. It was effective in Australia as well. In his brilliant book on the Howard Government and climate change, Guy Pearce said a leader of the denialist Lavoisier Group told him : 'there is an understanding in cabinet that all the science is crap' (Pearse, p.150, 2007) .

We should reflect on this for a moment. Think of the massive work done over many years. All the patient, reasoned discussion, all the careful and cautious peer reviewing. The measured public statements by scientists and their representatives. After many years of this, the view in cabinet was 'all the science is crap'.

To understand why this was it is instructive to go back to Exxon Mobil. Their funding was the tip of an iceberg. What the oil and coal companies did, starting at least 18 years ago, was to fund a range of think tanks, some big,

some small, some obviously political, some not obviously political at all. Some had names like the Scientific Alliance, the International Climate Science Coalition and the Centre for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change (and dozens more). In the case of many of them, they are simply bodies established as part of a public relations campaign. Their purpose is to advocate for the fossil fuel industry. The number of scientists with relevant expertise could be numbered on the fingers of your hands.

One of their major victories occurred in 2001 in the United States. In that year there was an attempt to forge a global pact to combat climate change which was badly damaged when President Bush withdrew from the Kyoto treaty. Bush's decision came after a powerful and long running campaign largely sponsored by the fossil fuel corporations, especially Exxon (Gelbspan, 2005; Begley, 2007). This campaign of climate denial had a major impact not only in Congress and the administration but also in the mass media.

The campaign of denial has been going on for so long that it has even been the subject of peer reviewed articles in the literature – and there are several books on just this topic. The distortions emerged in three main ways.

## False balance

First, there is the notion of *false balance*.

McCright and Dunlap studied the impact of conservative think tanks on the climate debate and described them as 'the most influential anti-environmental countermovement organizations at the national [US] level' (2003: 353). They showed that sceptics had a high media visibility in news stories (2003: 366). Part of this was due to a false notion of balance.

How does this occur? Ross Gelbspan, author of *The Heat is On*, notes that the ethical obligation of fairness can result in biased stories. The trouble is that sometimes when

journalists search for balance, they look for competing points of view and end up quoting bodies which have no scientific weight (1997: 57-58). A similar study was done by Boykoff and Boykoff of the prestige press. It found that adherence to the 'journalistic norm of balance' allowed an industry-funded public relations campaign to succeed in achieving biased coverage (2004:133-34).

Antilla (2005) found that many news stories on climate were framed as coverage of debate and controversy in which climate sceptics were frequently primary definers.

### **Brave dissidents against an oppressive orthodoxy**

The second method of distortion in the public relations campaign is to label the scientific knowledge as an 'orthodoxy', that is, a view held simply because it was conventional and backed by authority, rather than by its intrinsic merits. From the late 1990s the evidence of human-caused climate change strengthened. This had a paradoxical effect. Rather than this changing the minds of industry lobbyists, conservative think tanks and media columnists, they took the strongest point of the knowledge and turned it into a weakness. They argued that the growing scientific *consensus* was merely an *orthodoxy*. So the alarming body of fact and research was presented as a conformist view which relied only on the fact that it was supported by authority figures.

On this basis the climate deniers and sceptics, regardless of their lack of evidence and (in most cases) scientific qualifications, were elevated to the status of brave dissidents against an oppressive set of beliefs. The climate deniers were rebels standing up to oppressive authority. Saying that their views had not a skerrick of credibility was transformed into a matter of censorship of debate. Critics of the deniers were framed as intolerant of 'different views'.

Linked to the idea of scientific knowledge as an orthodoxy was the characterisation of real scientists as an elite. This was used in a negative sense and it was associated with other terms of abuse like 'inner city latte set', 'chardonnay socialists' and middle class elite. This method works in other situations and is particularly effective in countries like Australia and the US where there is a populist tradition of opposition to elites. (In Australia this is reflected in both our egalitarian tradition and the related 'tall poppy syndrome').

By characterising scientists and their environmentalist supporters as an elite, this discourse laid the foundation for implying that scientists could not be trusted. In popular parlance, elites are regarded as groups which have power or privilege. It is also widely accepted that such groups try to preserve this status. In this case the clinching argument is that the real motive of climate scientists was simply to scare governments and thereby secure more generous research grants.

### **Not science but mere politics and opinion**

The third method by which a distorted public debate is entrenched is through the reduction and transformation of the conclusions of the science into 'politics'. That is, the sceptics and their friends in industry point out that two

groups are warning of climate change. One is the climate scientists and the other is the environment movement. They then collapse the distinction between the political movement and the scientists. In this way the conclusions based on scientific knowledge are reduced to a mere opinion. In this way science is reduced to a political opinion. In the matter of opinion, anyone can hold an opinion and anyone's opinion is *prima facie* no better or worse than anyone else's. The next step in this strategy is to argue that the science of climate change, being simply politics and opinion, suffers from the problem of 'political correctness', a useful catch-all term of abuse (Wilson, 1996; Williams, 1995).

There is a literature on this too. Political scientist Marian Sawyer notes that political correctness became a collective label for political values (including environmentalism) which were regarded as 'elite fashions' lacking any ethical content (2004: 34). She traced this discursive shift to the American neo-conservatives' who used another collective label, 'the new class', to describe those who believed in political correctness.

These three strategies are not just the argy bargy and to-and-fro of dispute. Each is a carefully thought out strategy of rhetoric and argument. The people who devise these strategies are highly paid and very intelligent people. They are acutely aware of the eddies and flows of public opinion and popular prejudice. They are retained by corporations who have millions, if not billions, at stake if public opinion and government policy change. We know these are carefully planned strategies because there have been a small number of documents which have been inadvertently released by lobbyists. And we have a precedent which is the PR campaign to protect the tobacco industry. Its inner workings were exposed by court order which some years ago forced the release of millions of pages of correspondence, minutes and working papers.

### **Being right is not enough**

An important conclusion to draw is about evidence and about public opinion. All of this shows that *evidence alone* is not the determining factor in shaping public opinion. Those used to working with established facts and rigorous methods often find this hard to accept. In public debate facts are important but facts can be twisted or eradicated or made to stand upside down by sophisticated lobbyists and advocates.

We can see this in a parallel case. The evidence to confirm Iraq's possession of weapons mass destruction was put together over a year and a half, between September 11, 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. This so-called evidence was deemed adequate enough to support the invasion of a country at a terrible cost in lives. But the overwhelming evidence on climate change accumulated over more than 15 years by the best minds in the field, was deemed to be insufficient, wrong or politically motivated, or all three.

So relying on evidence alone to achieve public policy goals is not enough. The answer is not to blame the public, nor is the answer to ignore public debate and concentrate on winning support at the highest levels of government. Doing this alone may simply lead to the situation in which the cabinet believes 'all the science is crap'. Nor is the

answer to retreat to simply doing the science and leaving the debate to others.

My conclusion from all this is that individual scientists and their representative bodies must take an even greater part in public debate and engage with the mass media in a more full blooded way – at least on this issue. In the world of yesterday, respect flowed automatically to scientists. This respect was part of a different era. It was the era of the trusted family doctor and the trusted family solicitor. Such institutions still exist, but the world has changed.

Over the last 30 years what might be called the natural authority of all such groups has been questioned. Moreover, we have seen the rise of anti-science frames of mind. In the past there has been a tendency to be dignified and silent and to hope that the facts will speak for themselves. The danger was seen to be the politicisation of science by scientists who went too far. The reality is that the results of science are already politicised when major corporations behave in the way they have over climate change.

The results of scientific work in some fields no longer stand outside politics – they are already in the middle of it. All this means that in the world today if you stay silent and remain cautious, good science – science that can help people -- is in danger of being rolled.

There is another factor. By standing apart from debate, scientists risk the chance that some people will suspect that scientists have something to hide. Or that they are too snobbish to take part in the necessarily messy debate with other citizens; that they are afraid to stand up for themselves in public debate. All of this feeds the portrayal of scientists and environmentalists as an ‘elite’.

## What can be done

I'd like to finish by finding positive examples of what can be done. In 2006 The Royal Society in London directly confronted Exxon for promoting an ‘inaccurate and

misleading impression of the evidence on the causes of climate change that is documented in the scientific literature’ (Ward 2006). The use of the Society’s deserved prestige in such a public criticism had a major effect. The corporation was stung into trying to defend its own indefensible publicity.

Closer to home is another example. Earlier this year (2008) there was, yet again, in *The Australian*, an article scorning the science of climate change. For many years this newspaper has been one of the leading promoters of climate change denial (Hamilton 2007). The article was by a geo-physicist, Phil Chapman, who said that global temperatures were coming down and that we had better get ready for a new ice age (2008). He then went on to discuss the influence of sun spots on the climate. It is one of the tired and hoary climate denial claims which that newspaper is notorious for publishing. A few days later, surprisingly, there was a carefully written and devastating rebuttal of Chapman’s views in *The Australian*. It came from Professor David Karoly, a distinguished scientist from Melbourne University. This is the kind of response that is needed every time some nonsense is penned, but unfortunately it is all too rare. Some people think it is hard to get published in the media, and some people avoid the media altogether. This is a view which simply plays into the hands of those who want to distort or deny the results of science.

Science is indeed under siege. It is under siege from many quarters, including one part of the spectrum of religious views. It is also under siege from sections of industry which profit from profligate use of fossil fuel. Debates about religion vs. science can and will continue for a long while. But debates on the climate are of a different order and very pressing. It is vital that scientists find ways to engage with public opinion to combat the falsities of the deniers. On this issue the stakes are too high to do anything else.

## Acknowledgements

A great deal of information about the funding of climate change deniers can be found at the following URL (Exxon Secrets), based on publicly released documentation:

<http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/campaigns/global-warming-and-energy/exxon-secrets>

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