

Silencing the Scientists

Rupert Murdoch, Climate Denial and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism

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Last month, Americans were shocked at the attempted murder of Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and the killing of six bystanders. The local County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik captured the immediate assessment of many when he linked the attempted murder to the rise of violent anti-government rhetoric and imagery, observing, “The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous.” When asked if the Congresswoman had any enemies her father [replied](#): “Yeah. The whole Tea Party”. Many, including Giffords herself, had had a premonition that the inflammatory language of radical right-wing activists would sooner or later find real expression.

The same hate-filled rhetoric that created the circumstances in which Gabrielle Giffords was gunned down also stokes ferocious attacks on climate scientists and environmentalists in the United States. Debunking climate science is official policy at Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News; a leaked memo from management has instructed reporters to always cast doubt on data reporting global temperature increases. <http://climateprogress.org/2010/12/15/leaked-email-fox-news-sammon-cast-doubt-on-climate-science/>

Some of the bitterest attacks on climate scientists are made by commentators employed by Fox News. Fox ranters Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity often ridicule climate science. Glenn Beck [calls](#) global warming “the greatest scam in history” and gives air-time to Christopher Monckton to attack the work of climate scientists as fraudulent with his unique blend of statistical gobbledegook, invented “facts” and off-the-planet conspiracy theories. The network sometimes features Steve Milloy, an energy lobbyist who ran the The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition, a front group initially devoted to denying the link between smoking and cancer. As James Hoggan points out in his book *Climate Cover-Up*, Milloy is introduced as an expert on “junk science”, meaning climate science. <http://www.desmogblog.com/climate-cover-up>

Another Fox regular is Marc Morano, the former aide to Republican Senator James Inhofe, founder of the most malicious anti-science blog, and the man who [said](#) climate scientists deserve to be publicly flogged. Last April on Fox News, Morano launched a virulent attack on Professor Michael Mann of Penn State University, calling him a “charlatan” and responsible for “the best science that politics can manufacture”. When Morano singles out a climate scientist for attack on his website he includes their email addresses and invites his followers to “get in touch”. Many of them do.

Last year I wrote a [series of articles](#) detailing how Australia's most distinguished climate scientists have become the target of a new form of cyber-bullying aimed at driving them out of the public domain. Each time they enter the public debate through a newspaper article or radio interview they are immediately subjected to a torrent of aggressive, abusive and, at times, threatening emails. I have spoken to Australian

climate scientists who have upgraded security at their homes because of threats from climate deniers.

The exposé of cyber-bullying was immediately picked up in the United States where the phenomenon is even worse. *Scientific American* gave it prominence and, in Britain, *Nature* did too, and many more stories of intimidation emerged into the light of day. Several scientists confirm that the volume of abuse reached a peak in the months after the Climategate story broke in November 2009.

Dr Kevin Trenberth, head of analysis at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Colorado, [turned over](#) to university security 19 pages of “extremely foul, nasty, [and] abusive” emails collected in the four months after the Climategate storm broke. Another prominent climate scientist had a dead animal dumped on his doorstep and now travels with body-guards.

Stephen Schneider, an eminent climatologist at Stanford University who died a few months ago, [said last year](#) that he had received hundreds of threatening emails. Exasperated he asked: “What do I do? Learn to shoot a magnum? Wear a bullet-proof jacket?” He believed that a scientist would be killed, adding: “They shoot abortion doctors here”. They shoot Congresswomen too. When his name appeared on a neo-Nazi “death list”, alongside other climate scientists with apparent Jewish ancestry, the police were called in. Schneider [said he](#) had observed an “immediate, noticeable rise” in emails whenever climate scientists were attacked by prominent right-wing US commentators.

Paul Ehrlich was [quoted](#) in *Nature* saying: “Everyone is scared shitless, but they don’t know what to do”. The story noted that the bullying and threats intensify after anti-climate science rants from the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Marc Morano and Steve Milloy. Except Limbaugh they are all either employed by Fox News or appear often on the network.

Michael Mann of “hockey stick” fame said the same about the hate mail he had received: “I’m not comfortable talking about the details, especially as some of these matters remain under police investigation,” [he said](#). “What I can say is that the emails come in bursts, and do seem to be timed with high-profile attack pieces on talk radio and other fringe media outlets.” The most influential “fringe media outlet” vilifying scientists is Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News.

Cyber-bullies and Fox demagogues are not the only ones out to punish Mann for his work. Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli [has attempted](#) to use state fraud laws to force the University of Virginia to release huge volumes of documents and correspondence in attempt to show malfeasance by Mann when he was employed by that university (he is now at Penn State). Cuccinelli claims that Mann had defrauded taxpayers in seeking grants for his research, but had no evidence to convince the court to grant subpoenas. A lawyer for the American Association of University Professors [has said](#) that Cuccinelli’s suit has “echoes of McCarthyism” and will deter others from undertaking climate research.

Official harassment

The campaign of harassment against scientists took a sinister turn last year when Oklahoma Republican Senator James Inhofe [called for](#) some of the world's most eminent climate scientists to be investigated for criminal violations. A document prepared by his staff on the US Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works claims scientists mentioned in emails stolen from the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) at the University of East Anglia are guilty of manipulating data and obstructing its release. It lists federal laws they may have violated and names 17 climate scientists whom Inhofe claims should be investigated for possible criminal prosecution.

One of those listed, Raymond Bradley, the director of climate science research at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, [responded](#): "I am worried about it, I have to say. You can understand that this powerful person is using the power of his office to intimidate people and to harass people and you wonder whether you should have legal counsel. It is a very intimidating thing and that is the point."

The accusation of criminality against leading climate scientists takes the denialist campaign of harassment and intimidation to new depths, and immediately conjures up images of McCarthyism. In November 2009, Inhofe's fellow Republican Congressman James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin wrote to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) demanding that scientists whose names appear in the stolen CRU emails be blacklisted from all further work with the IPCC.

[According to](#) *Scientific American*, deniers in Congress have used their offices to send "intimidating letters" threatening dire consequences to scientists working on climate change. One of the recipients, NASA scientist Gavin Schmidt, said: "That is chilling the work of science in the agencies. It's certainly very off-putting for scientists who want to talk about their stuff in public but fear the political consequences. Nobody wants to create an enemy on the hill."

In an editorial last March on cyber-bullying, *Nature* reported on Senator Inhofe's attempts to criminalise climate scientists before [commenting](#): "As a member of the minority party, Inhofe is powerless for now, but that may one day change." That day came last November with the mid-term elections in which the Republicans, powered by a surge of support for the Tea Party, won a majority in the House of Representatives. Before the election Climate Progress [noted](#) that "every single GOP [Republican] Senate candidate now either denies climate science or opposes even the most moderate, business friendly, Republican-designed approach to reducing emissions". With the elections, both houses [saw a flood](#) of new representatives who are climate deniers. "Of the freshmen Republicans ... 36 of 85 in the House and 11 of 13 in the Senate have publicly questioned the science."

McCarthyite congressman James Sensenbrenner is now the deputy chair of the House Science Committee, [which plans](#) to investigate the veracity of climate science. "I personally believe that the solar flares are more responsible for climatic cycles than anything that human beings do", [Sensenbrenner said](#), as if the role of solar flares were a matter of personal belief and had not been thoroughly investigated by climate scientists. Suddenly Senator Inhofe appears less isolated and fanatical.

A series of inquiries has exonerated the scientists whose emails were stolen, and affirmed that there is nothing in them to undermine the science. If you read them, what the hacked UEA emails reveal is the enormous external pressure climate scientists work under. They show they have constantly been accused of being frauds and cheats; their work has been twisted and misrepresented; and they have been bombarded with vexatious freedom-of-information requests orchestrated by denialists.

In short, they were caught up in a hot political debate that they did not really understand or want to be part of, yet they were the target of savvy, secretive and ruthless organisations ready to pounce on anything they said or wrote. This is the real story of “Climategate”. Instead, the scientists in question have seen their professional reputations trashed in the world’s media for no cause. After the media storm and a series of death threats, the head of the Climatic Research Unit Dr Phil Jones [was driven](#) to the point of suicide.

Moves are underway to suppress the dissemination of climate science. Last year the South Dakota legislature passed a resolution calling for “balanced teaching of global warming in the public schools of South Dakota”, the type of resolution that now sees creationism taught alongside evolution in some states. The draft resolution noted that the climate is affected by “a variety of climatological, meteorological, astrological, thermological, cosmological and ecological dynamics”. The inclusion of “astrological” and “thermological” effects suggests a woeful understanding of science.

Last February the Utah House of Representatives passed a [resolution](#) rejecting climate science. One supporter of the Bill said “environmentalists were part of a vast conspiracy to destroy the American way of life and control world population through forced sterilisation and abortion”. In January of this year a bill titled the “Scientific Education and Academic Freedom Act” [was put to](#) the Oklahoma legislature that would require teachers to challenge theories including evolution, the chemical origins of life and global warming.

The culture war

In the United States there is now a deep divide between liberal and conservative voters in their beliefs about global warming. As is now well [documented](#), the opening of this gulf was due to the fact that from the mid-1990s Republican Party activists, in collaboration with fossil fuel interests and conservative think tanks, had successfully associated acceptance of global warming science with “liberal” views.

That global warming has been made a battleground in the wider culture war is most apparent from the political and social views of those who reject climate science outright. Among those who dismiss climate science, 76 per cent [describe themselves](#) as “conservative” and only three per cent as “liberal” (with the rest “moderate”). They overwhelmingly oppose redistributive policies, programs to reduce poverty and regulation of business. They prefer to watch Fox News and listen to Rush Limbaugh.

Like those whose opinions they value—shock jocks and television demagogues—climate deniers are disproportionately older, white, male and conservative—those who feel their cultural identity most threatened by the implications of climate change. While the debate is superficially about the science, in truth it is about deep-rooted

feelings of cultural identity. This makes deniers immune to argument, and their influence will wane only as they grow old and die. The question is: How much damage will they do in the meantime?