

Climate, Society, and Caesar's Wife

The purpose of *Weather, Climate, and Society* is to provide a forum for scientific research on the interactions of weather and climate with society. One subject that has not been the focus of scientific research in these pages to date is the impact of the so-called climate change deniers on either the scientific enterprise or society itself. The reason for this absence is undoubtedly that the science of climate and society is so broad and evolving so fast that both physical and social scientists in this field (who are the authors and readers of articles in the journal) devote their time and attention to improving our understanding of the science of this important nexus. Another reason, however, is that climate change denial has traditionally been outside the research interests of most scientists. We know it exists, we deplore it, and we move rapidly back to the safety of science itself.

Recent events, however, make this approach indefensible. A survey conducted by Anthony Leiserowitz and his colleagues at Yale University and George Mason University found that the proportion of the U.S. population that believes that the science of climate change is a hoax or a conspiracy rose from 7% in 2008 to 16% in late 2009 (Leiserowitz et al. 2010). During the same period, attacks on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) showed that climate change scientists can be both human and careerist in their e-mail exchanges and that there was inadequate fact checking of the final report. These attacks on the IPCC, which have been widely reported and discussed, have succeeded in calling into question the overall findings of this 20-year effort to summarize scientific research on climate change for policy makers and the public. In another arena, opponents of evolution in the United States are taking legal action to force public schools to teach that climate change, like evolution, is only a theory proposed by scientists and that contrary theories (largely posed by nonscientists) are equally legitimate.

Some scientists may place climate change deniers in the same category as Holocaust deniers or deliberate purveyors of misinformation, but this would be a mistake. The growing community of climate change opponents contains a broad mixture of people and organizations, many of them trying hard to be responsible in a field in which they have little knowledge or experience. At the same time, they are actively and successfully promoting their views to an equally uninformed general public that confuses weather variability with climate change and fears the consequences of climate change. Because it is easier to live with disbelief than fear, unacknowledged fear and misunderstandings can prompt aggressive disbelief.

What should be the response of the scientific community to the growing numbers and activism of climate change deniers? A number of activities are already under way, such as the request by the IPCC to reestablish its veracity through an impartial examination of its procedures. But individual climate change scientists, particularly social scientists, have a responsibility in this situation as well. Thus far, scientists have been merely observers of the rise of a militant climate change denial movement. This needs to change. Scientists, particularly social scientists, should do what they do best: conduct research on the phenomenon of climate change denial. That is, they should conduct research on the opposition to climate change. Among the questions that need to be examined are the following: What motivates this movement? What arguments are most appealing to the uncommitted or the unbelievers? Who is the audience and why is it receptive to antisience arguments? Is climate change denial a stalking horse for other political, economic, or religious interests? These questions are part of the scientific territory that *Weather, Climate, and Society* was intended

to cover, and research on these topics could provide valuable information that can be used to communicate the nature of climate change to the wider, nonscientific public.

At the same time, scientists must also recognize that the basis for much of the opposition to climate change science is ignorance of the science and fear of change. This suggests that widespread personal efforts are also needed to educate people and organizations about the science behind climate change and the benefits as well as the problems that climate change could introduce. Scientists and the media have a tendency to focus on the extreme problems resulting from climate change—and these problems are, to be sure, very serious—but scientists need to emphasize as well that there could be some benefits in climate change.

Another response should be to identify and work with allies outside the scientific community in the response to climate change deniers and public disbelief. Too many people distrust scientists and view them as part of the problem of climate change. But scientists speaking with representatives of industry, evangelical and mainstream churches, the media, labor and professional organizations, and other groups that recognize the reality of climate change will have a stronger voice than scientists speaking alone. The scientific community must overcome the isolation that undercuts its message by reconnecting with the public.

Finally, the scientific community must acknowledge that, innocence aside, its role in the backlash against climate science is unfortunately that of Caesar's wife. After a scandal involving his wife Pompeia, in which she was judged to be innocent of any wrongdoing, Julius Caesar divorced her, saying famously, Caesar's wife must be above suspicion. Unfair as it may seem, the scientific community is now, and for some time will continue to be, held to a different set of standards than the climate change deniers. We cannot unilaterally change this situation, but we can contribute to lowering the barricades between the scientific and non-scientific publics and, in the process, contribute to returning the subject of climate change to its legitimate place in public and policy discourse.

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REFERENCE

- Leiserowitz, A., E. Maibach, and C. Roser-Renouf, 2010: Climate change in the American mind: Americans' global warming beliefs and attitudes in January 2010. Yale University and George Mason University, Yale Project on Climate Change, 10 pp.