

David versus Goliath

The Clash Between Political Interest and
Science

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Nathan Reilly

It seems ever since the evolution of the 24/7/365 mainstream media through numerous sources such as internet, television, radio and others nonstop politics is right in front of us every day. C-SPAN, CNN, MSNBC, NPR and other mainstream news sources now broadcast news all the time and politics covers a good portion of that time. It's hard to announce yourself apathetic toward politics in today's society, it's everywhere, it's simply impossible to ignore unless you live under a bridge. It's also no secret that in today's society it seems that the political spectrum thinks it needs to invest itself into everything: steroids in baseball, healthcare, foreign relations, and yes even the playoff system in college football and since the government sponsors a lot of scientific research, politics are now embedded more in science than ever before. Knowing that, science and politics (or politicians) don't also match and sometimes clash. In this piece, I wish to explore some of the species clashes between politics, the public and science and also if journalists and politicians should be responsible for what they report or support, much like scientists are with methods such as peer review.

There are many examples of where politics and science don't get along. Some tackle social issues such as reproductive science, and development where others tackle along natural sciences spectrum or global climate change. Here are examples of this clash in examples such as embryonic stem cell research and global climate change.

In 2001, George W. Bush announced that federal funds may be awarded for research using human embryonic stem cells if the following criteria are met :
(<http://stemcells.nih.gov/policy/2001policy.htm>)

- The derivation process (which begins with the destruction of the embryo) was initiated prior to 9:00 P.M. EDT on August 9, 2001.
- The stem cells must have been derived from an embryo that was created for reproductive purposes and was no longer needed.
- Informed consent must have been obtained for the donation of the embryo and that donation must not have involved financial inducements.

This policy completely restricted the advancement in scientific research on embryonic stem cells. In fact since the politics behind stem cell research have become so politicize that many researchers are just focusing on adult stem cell research limiting the United States scientific progress on the subject. But it's even more interesting how Bush came to this decision; as Steven Pinker put it in his book "The Blank Slate":

"He derived the policy after consulting not just with scientists but with philosophers and religious thinkers. Many of them framed the moral problem in terms of "ensoulment," the moment at which the cluster of cells that will grow into a child is endowed with a soul. Some argued that ensoulment occurs at conception, which implies that the blastocyst (the five-day-old balls of cells from which stem cells are taken) is morally equivalent to a person and that destroying it is a form of murder. That argument proved decisive, which means that the American policy on perhaps the most promising medical technology of the twenty-first century was decided by pondering the

moral issue as it might have been framed centuries before: When does the ghost first enter the machine.”

President, Barack Obama, who I would say is more pro-science than his predecessor revoked the policy eight years later. But, who knows with the transfer of opposing party presidents alternating in the future you can be assured that restrictions will be taken off and then put on back and forth. As for scientists, who would want to study something that in 4 or 8 years your research project will cease to have funding available which is why many of them now only focus on adult stem cells which however promising, doesn't compare to the possibility of embryonic stem cells

Now for the topic which seems to have taken front page news coverage with the Climate Conference going on in Copenhagen and the leaked emails which I wish not to cover because I've already addressed it in previous posts. Global climate change is a very complicated problem, in fact it requires so many different institutions coming together with all of their outside interests on the side to come up with a common plan to prevent a tropic catastrophe which many of them may never see in their lifetime (so why should they care right?). In an interesting event this week, Senator Jim Inhofe (R-Oklahoma) attended the Copenhagen conference to undermine the presence of the president (who had positive goals for attending) and according to *Politico* during a meeting with a few reporters said, “the global warming hoax started at the United Nations and was spread because it was believed by the Hollywood elite.” Not only does this show his uneducated biases (it's not Hollywood's fault, scientific evidence and thousands on top of thousands of peer reviewed climate and environmental research papers that give the scientific community a vast overwhelming consensus that the climate is changing and the change is NOT a positive one) not to mention show America's ignorance to serious problems of global warming, but it's also a completely useless stance to have. Thomas Friedman, columnist in the New York Times and author of the book, “Hot, Flat and Crowded”, says in his NY Times column referring to global warming deniers called “What They Really Believe”,

“They believe it is much better for America that the world be dependent on oil for energy — a commodity largely controlled by countries that hate us and can only go up in price as demand increases — rather than on clean power technologies that are controlled by us and only go down in price as demand increases. And, finally, they believe that people in the developing world are very happy being poor — just give them a little running water and electricity and they'll be fine. They'll never want to live like us....But there are two other huge trends barreling down on us with energy implications that you simply can't deny. And the way to renew America is for us to take the lead and invent the technologies to address these problems.”

Now, I'll expand my dialogue to answering the question if journalists and politicians should be responsible for what they say and their views on issues much like scientists are. Let's first tackle politicians.

Politicians are a special case, one thing I found interesting is Dictionary.com's definition of a politician: a seeker or holder of public office, who is more concerned about winning favor or retaining power than about maintaining principles. My personal definition of a politician should be a representative of the people he/she represents in office. Many politicians adapt policies in absence of any scientific reasoning but adopt the reasoning of the major campaign contributors that got them into office and not necessarily the view that the public he/she represents holds. This would explain Senator Inhofe's stance on global warming since 2 of his top 3 campaign contributors from 2005-2010 were the oil and gas

industry and the electric utilities industry for roughly \$635,000 (<http://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/summary.php?cid=N00005582>) and a recent NBC poll (2007) suggested that 64% of people believed that global climate change is occurring (before Climategate). Therefore he is not representing the majority of the people he represents. Now that I have address Jim Inhofe I would like to answer my question of whether politicians should have to prove their position on issues that they support but are NOT backed by scientific evidence. I would answer that question with saying yes they should have evidence to back their stances on issues but if they didn't hopefully the voters would not reelect that person, very much like political natural selection.

Now I wish to shift my focus to journalists and by journalist I mean, people that report the news (radio, television, newspaper, etc.). Many people do not fact check for example an Anderson Cooper report on something in fact most people take his word that he did some accurate fact checking research using reliable sources. There is so much information available out there that you cannot possibly check everything everyone says. That's where you go to journalists that you are comfortable, journalists that have proven themselves to have a tight grip with reality and reliable as far as accuracy is concerned. Here I go again where the public has its own natural selection on journalists; good ones have daily and weekly pieces, and bad ones find other careers.

It's sad that we even need to bring up moral problems of people in respected position in the public square. Politics has veered so far off the path of advancing national success and only focusing on their own political promise and helping out the ones who got them there (campaign contributors, in other words, not necessarily doing what is best for society but what is best for their reelection). Politics simply just doesn't belong in the scientific community.