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Pathologies in Climate Science: "There Should be Consequences"

I think what Michael is saying is that there should be consequences for publishing crap.

And he and others are also intimating that you and your Dad’s long term reputation might suffer if you continue palming off bullshit that impresses nobody but Rush Limbaugh and a bunch of far right teabaggers.

Seriously, Pielke, what happens if the Republicans don’t retake Congress next year? You and Lomberg will never be called as expert witnesses again. No dough, no meeting munchies. You are betting your academic standing on the fate of a party of red-necked greasebags from the ugliest part of the deep South.

D’you guys want to be the Climate Science version of Michael Behe?

I’m not sure where Mr. Murphy gets the idea that I am a Republican (I’m not), nor do I conduct a partisan political calculus before doing my research. This gets more and more amazing.

The publication of Klotzbach et al. offers an opportunity for a sort of real-world sociological experiment in the climate scientific community. Our paper builds on a large scientific literature and explores a largely unrecognized mechanism that may explain a significant (>10%) amount of the global surface temperature trends. It might prove to be correct, or it might prove wrong. We think that the arguments have merit, and so too did our peer reviewers. Science normally works by advancing hypothesis, collecting data and reporting what you find. Results are published, considered and this leads to new hypotheses and the process repeats. Along the way people debate and discuss interesting results, at conferences, at water coolers, in blogs and even in legislatures.

But this is climate science, and the rules here are a little different. Our paper enters a context where many climate scientists are also strong political advocates. This means that they judge papers not simply by their substance but by who they perceive that the results will benefit in the political process. Our paper suggests that global temperature trends are overstated if the surface trends are used to represent trends in the lower atmosphere. If true, this would likely have some relevance for climate modeling, comparisons of surface and satellite temperatures, and understanding possible measurement biases in the surface record — that is, many topics that people like to debate. However, it does not have a lot of significance for the overall political response to climate change, as I have noted multiple times.

The paper has been received as being interesting because immediately upon its release we have been engaged in a public colloquy with several climate scientists including Gavin Schmidt, James Annan and Michael Tobis who have tried everything possible to discredit our paper and its authors, ranging from snark, quick and dirty analyses on tangential aspects of the paper and semantic argumentation. In both science and politics such behavior is of course business-as-usual, and over the long-term science is largely self-correcting. So such behavior might be boorish but it is nothing really to complain about, as it is fairly normal and expected.

But our colloquy with climate scientists has taken a disturbing turn as one of these scientists (Tobis) has now elevated his various complaints to a thinly veiled threat against the authors based on his views about what he sees as political implications of our paper. He writes (emphasis in original):

If there were no policy issues at stake, if the modest and
Watts to Morano to Inhofe play and its like, we are forced to pay attention.

Regarding getting out of this very unfortunate flavor of time sink, one thing I can imagine is to have gradations of "peer review" more complex than "published" or "unpublished". Inhofe shouldn't be waving something like this around in the senate claiming it meets the highest standards.

Even harder, but more urgent, is have a mechanism to prevent authors from promoting public misinterpretations of their publications. That sort of behavior should have consequences.

One wonders, what sort of "consequences" should I and my co-authors be subject to? After patiently engaging Tobis on his web site and here in a sincere effort to discuss our work, he decides to issue a threat? Climate science is pathological indeed.

I was unaware that Inhofe was waving our paper around as Tobis claims, can someone provide evidence of this?

One can fully understand that if a set of collaborators who collectively have probably thousands of peer reviewed publications are met with not just derision but a threat of consequences upon publishing and discussing a peer-reviewed paper building on years of work, this will create a poisonous atmosphere for just about everyone in climate science. This is probably the point.

Let me emphasize that the vast majority of climate scientists are decent, hard-working people, and I count very many as very good friends. However the actions of a few cast a dark shadow on the entire community, and this will continue until the community starts to self-police the bad behavior of its most publicly visible voices.

Threats have no place in public discussions involving climate scientists.
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