

The art of manufacturing uncertainty: A comment

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The author of an article in the LA Times, a professor of public health, supports the global warming hypothesis by accusing the oil industry of manufacturing uncertainty, where there is none, by hiring scientists who are paid well to “throw mud and crank up the fog machinery” (The art of manufacturing uncertainty, Los Angeles Times, CA - Jun 24, 2005).

He supports his argument by citing the case of the tobacco industry. These firms maliciously attempted to create uncertainty and controversy over the claim by scientists that cigarettes were addictive and that they caused lung cancer. In the end the scientists were proven right and the tobacco industry was hit with lawsuits. The moral of the story is that scientists can be counted on to be right on public health issues and that we should simply trust them to be right on global warming as well. History does not support this view, however.

It was once scientific gospel that there was a cancer epidemic in America caused by trace amounts of synthetic industrial chemicals in the environment. The architects of this movement had specifically dismissed cigarette smoking as a cause of lung cancer. It turned out in the end that when the effects of smoking, longer life spans, and improvements in diagnostic methods were taken into account, the feared epidemic growth rate in cancer disappeared from the statistics. These statistical details were overlooked and the hypothesis became truth by virtue of momentum.

As another example of science gone wrong, consider the history of DDT. When DDT was first introduced, the advertising slogan of Dow Chemical was “Better living through chemistry” and the inventor of DDT was awarded the Nobel Prize because his invention had almost eradicated malaria and other insect borne diseases. America at that time was having a love affair with chemistry, X-rays, and all things new.

However, the wanton overuse of DDT was shown to harm wildlife, in particular certain birds. The book “Silent Spring” presented an Armageddon scenario with no birds to sing in spring because DDT had killed them off. This book was a watershed event in American history. It marks the beginning of the swing of the pendulum from irrational chemophilia all the way to irrational chemophobia.

The media seized upon this book and it became a sensational best seller. It gave rise to environmental activism. Much good resulted from it because the excessive use of synthetic chemicals, radioactivity, X-rays, and technology in general was checked. However, it left the extreme ideological legacy that all things synthetic are bad and all things natural are good although most known carcinogens today are natural and not synthetic and although it is now acknowledged that the DDT ban in the hysterical aftermath of “Silent Spring” was an overreaction. Used properly DDT offers a net benefit to man and its total ban has made possible the resurgence of malaria.

Although the author does a good job of projecting the evils of the tobacco industry upon the oil industry, he does not address the issue at hand. It is axiomatic that the oil industry will oppose a movement that faults its product for environmental catastrophe. That in itself is no reason to support the global warming hypothesis. It must be addressed on its own merit and not on the basis of the verdict on the tobacco industry and not simply by attacking the oil industry.

The earth has been warming since 1979 and we also have good data that atmospheric carbon dioxide measured in Hawaii has been going up since 1958. These data raise some important questions. Is the increase in CO₂ the cause of rising temperatures? Is our use of fossil fuels the cause of the increase in CO₂? Is it possible for human intervention to affect the course of climate change?

No clear answers to these questions exist but the answers are apparently obvious to extreme Green followers of the "Silent Spring" revolution because they have now come to stand against all human activity. It is therefore to be expected that they will find a way to blame human activity for global warming. As for throwing mud and cranking up fog machines, no one does it better than the Greens who are so convinced that they are right that they are not beyond bending the truth to scare the public.

The usual method of their fog machine is to withhold vital information. For example, the claim that the West Antarctic Ice Shelf is melting and that it will raise sea levels by 4.9 meters, omits the information that at 0.25 mm per year it will take 19,600 years for the sea to rise by 4.9 meters and that the next ice age will surely have intervened long before then.

Scientists work under a lot of pressure to get funding for their research and to publish their papers. In their desperation and enthusiasm they sometimes go awry and they have even been known to doctor the data so that they can reach the kind of conclusion that will ensure publication and continued funding. Scientists funded by the oil industry are more likely to push the industry agenda, as the author has noted. Likewise, we would expect that those funded by organizations that are pushing the Kyoto Protocol would tend to see things in that light. It is up to the informed public to come to their own conclusions.

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