

An Exercise in Scientific Integrity: Media Policy

Numerous headline-grabbing examples have emerged in recent years of public affairs officers and political appointees in federal agencies limiting media access to scientists, editing press releases and scientific reports, and generally restricting the open communication of science.

I. Real-World Examples

Dr. James Hansen, a top climate scientist at NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, is the most famous victim of this sort of political interference. After calling in December 2005 for the United States to reduce its global warming emissions, Dr. Hansen discovered that NASA officials were reviewing and filtering his public statements and press interviews, limiting his ability to publicly express his scientific opinions. George Deutsch, the White House appointee primarily responsible for this interference, argued that his job was "to make the president look good." The scandal prompted NASA to release a new media policy supporting the principles of openness.

1. Many top U.S. scientists work at federal agencies. When, if ever, do you feel it is permissible to restrict federal scientists from stating their scientific opinions? Consider constitutional rights in your answer.
2. What is the appropriate role of a public affairs officer in a scientific agency? Consider the writing and editing of press releases, contacts with journalists, and direction and facilitation of interviews.
3. In 2004, Dr. Drew Shindell, an ozone specialist and NASA climatologist, attempted to describe his new research in a press release titled "Cool Antarctica may warm rapidly this century, study finds." NASA headquarters wanted the title "softened," and changed it to "Scientists predict Antarctic climate changes" over Dr. Shindell's objections. Discuss briefly your opinion on the action taken by NASA, and its likely effect on media interest in the research.
4. NASA scientists have reported that interactions with public affairs offices have improved since the agency's new media policy was put in place. Should all federal agencies have media policies that explicitly protect scientific integrity? Name a few directives these policies might include.

II. Survey Results

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has conducted numerous anonymous surveys of scientists in federal agencies to determine the extent of political interference in publications and media contacts. A sampling of results is listed below.

Food and Drug Administration (FDA):

- Over 600 scientists (61 percent of respondents) said they knew of cases where political appointees had “inappropriately injected themselves into FDA determinations or actions.”
- Over 190 scientists (20 percent) said they “have been asked explicitly by FDA decision makers to provide incomplete, inaccurate or misleading information to the public, regulated industry, media, or elected/senior government officials.”
- Over 390 scientists (40 percent) said they could not publicly “express any concerns about public health without fear of retaliation.”

Climate scientists (across seven different agencies):

- 150 scientists (58 percent of respondents) experienced inappropriate interference with climate science research in the past five years.
- 57 scientists (21 percent) personally experienced pressure to eliminate the words “climate change” or “global warming” from communications.
- 41 scientists (15 percent) personally experienced changes or edits to documents that changed the meaning of scientific findings.
- 144 scientists (52 percent) said their agency’s public affairs officials always or frequently monitor scientists’ communications with the media.

5. Do the statistics above seem unusual or too high? Which of the statistics worry you the most?

6. Pick one of the concerns above and design a (brief) media policy statement that addresses the issue by protecting scientific integrity.

7. Whistleblower protection ensures that federal scientists who speak out about abuses of science in their agency need not fear retaliation such as harassment, suspension, or termination. Should media policies include such protection? Should the federal government strengthen whistleblower protections for scientists?

8. Should scientists have the right to final review of all scientific documents to ensure the science has been correctly represented? Why or why not?

For more, see the UCS report *Atmosphere of Pressure* at http://www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity.