

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.

As long as the scientist makes it clear that he or she is speaking as an individual and not as a representative of a federal agency, the scientist has a right to speak about his or her research and its ramifications. Of course, scientists cannot divulge classified material, etc.

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.

Public affairs officers should promote media coverage of important scientific and institutional developments, coordinate and facilitate contact between scientists and journalists, and provide timely, accurate, and professional media assistance. Any press releases they draft should be approved by the scientists involved before release.

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.

NASA inappropriately edited the title of Dr. Shindell's press release to "soften" its impact in the media. Removal of the words "cool" and "warm rapidly this century" greatly decreased the attractiveness of the story to reporters who would have been interested in a story about new global warming effects. The new wording is so vague that there is no indication of the timing and direction of the changes.

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.

Yes, all federal agencies should have media policies that explicitly protect federal scientists. These policies should include boundaries for public affairs officers, explicit recognition of a scientist's right to free speech, right of last review, and whistleblower protections for scientists.

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?

Supported opinion

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

Supported opinion

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?

Yes and yes. Scientists who perceive improper interference with federal science and are unable to correct it from within the agency should be protected from retaliation if they seek help from a higher authority.

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?

Yes. Media officers should correct documents for clarity but not content. Scientists should always be given the opportunity to work with the media officer to review content that pertains to their research and ensure the science is not being misrepresented.

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