

The Shadow on American Democracy

I just did an interview with CNN (Miles O'Brien) re "censoring science". The point I emphasized is that overreaching by the Executive Branch, trying to make government science submit to political command and control, is a threat to our democracy, and, as a result, a threat to the planet. The scary part about this story is that seeds have been sown, and a playbook has been codified (although not written!), that will make the situation much worse unless the American public recognizes the problem and makes an issue of it. This is a bi-partisan problem – and neither party is trying to fix it. It is remarkable how wimpish Congress has become in accepting subjugation to the Executive Branch, contrary to designs and intents of our Founding Fathers.

Congressional testimony. Do you know that before a government scientist testifies to Congress his/her testimony is typically reviewed and edited by the White House Office of Management and Budget? When I asked for a justification, I was told that a government scientist's testimony "needs to be consistent with the President's budget".

Huh? There have never been any budget numbers in my testimony or in the testimony of most scientists. And OMB's editing of the scientific content is invariably designed to make the testimony fit better with the position of the political party in power (yes, it is a bi-partisan problem). Where is it stated or implied in the Constitution that the Executive Branch should have such authority? (Actually, does the Constitution not vest control of the purse strings to Congress?) Why does not Congress get incensed about this and fight back?

Offices of Propaganda. The Public Affairs Offices (PAOs) of science agencies have become mouthpieces for the Administration in power. This, too, is a bi-partisan problem. Top people in the Headquarters Offices of Public Affairs can and often are thrown out in a heart-beat when an election changes the party in control of the Executive Branch.

The Executive Branch has learned that the PAOs can be effective political instruments and, with some success, they are attempting to turn them into Offices of Propaganda, masters of double-speak ("clean coal", "clear skies", "healthy forests"...) that would make Orwell envious. Again it is a bi-partisan problem, the control of PAOs being exercised by top political appointees who are replaced rapidly with a change of administration. It is these political appointees that are the problem – the career civil servants at the NASA Centers, e.g., are professionals of high integrity, as are most people at Headquarters.

One may wonder: why doesn't the media object to this situation? I believe that I learned the reason: it is encapsulated in the phrase "that's hearsay!". I heard that phrase over and over again in 2004 after I stated publicly that NASA press releases were being spirited from NASA HQ to the White House for either editing or deep-sixing, when they concerned "sensitive" topics such as global warming. Even NPR did not seem to want to touch that story unless there were multiple pieces of proof on paper.

The phrase "that's hearsay" seems to make the media folks quake in their boots, doubtless because of the threat of a lawsuit. That probably explains why the New York Times stories about censorship of scientists at NASA that came out in early 2006 became a story about a low-level 24-year-old, who then "resigned". Reporters, New York Times included, knew that the problem went much higher, but instead of focusing on the threat to democracy, it became too-much an amusing story about a renegade trying to reverse scientific understanding of the "big bang", etc.

The actual story is made crystal clear in the new book “Censoring Science” by Mark Bowen (author of “On Thin Ice”, a gripping, albeit long, story about Lonnie Thompson’s quest for ice cores from alpine glaciers). Bowen gets insiders at HQ and elsewhere to provide extensive information, most of it “on the record”, about how PAO works to cover its tracks (“Gretchen, don’t e-mail me on this!” There are some heroines in this story, middle level people who refused to comply with orders from political appointees that they recognized as being inappropriate.) By the way, I gave Bowen some long interviews and documentation (and my mug is on the book jacket), but I have no financial interest in the book.

The scary part of this story is that PAO political appointees are learning how to cover their tracks. The picture that Bowen presents is one in which PAO political appointees can communicate directly with the White House. One has to wonder, if the Administrator objected to the PAO political appointee activities, how long would it be before he was on the soup line? As the tracks are covered better and better, it is as if we have a shadow government organization controlling information that the public receives.

How to fix it? There is an article “Freedom of Speech in Government Science” in the current *Issues in Science and Technology*, Winter 2008, pages 31-34, by David Resnik. Presumably Resnik is well-intentioned, but I take vehement exception to one of his bottom lines. The article sounds fine for the most part, but keep in mind the common technique of telling you ten things that are true followed by slipping in the whopper, the very questionable point or conclusion concerning the main point of interest. Here is Resnik’s whopper:

“...when a government scientist communicates with the media, the public (or even journalists) may mistakenly assume that the scientist is speaking for the government, when he or she is expressing only a personal opinion. If the scientist expresses an opinion that goes against official policy, this can create (sic) confusion in the public mind. To minimize confusion and to enable an administration to convey consistent (sic) policy messages, it is appropriate to allow public relations officers to review a government scientist’s communications with the media.”

Perhaps I am taking his statement out of context, but he seems to mean review the statement before it is made. This is where we need the Mercedes-driving lawyers (http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/distro_Lawlessness_070927.pdf) to help us. What Resnik is saying, which PAO would latch onto in a heartbeat, consists of “prior restraint”, as he suggests review prior to a testimony or statement being made, not correction after the fact by the government. If prior approval for scientific opinions are required, a scientist does not have a snowball’s chance in Hades of providing his unadulterated opinion on a “sensitive” subject.

This is true regardless of which party is in power. The most horrific experience that I ever had with NASA PAO was in 2000 during a Democratic administration when I tried to get a press release through on “Global warming in the twenty-first century: An alternative scenario”, which emphasized the importance of non-CO₂ climate forcings. After umpteen iterations, I threw in the towel.

Resnik suggests that the best way to safeguard free speech in government science is for a scientific organization, such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), to designate a committee or group to focus on these issues. That may do some good, but by itself it will do little.

The presumption of democracy is that the public is informed, honestly informed. Government scientists work for the tax payer and should be allowed to report their research results without political interference. Elected officials can use scientific information as they see

fit – they must consider all factors in making policies, not just scientific data. But they should not be allowed to torque the scientific data, or choose what information is allowed to be presented and what information is deep-sixed. Such filtering, which is a recipe for bad decisions and poor management, has never been as intense as in the past several years, in my opinion.

The main problems could be fixed as follows: (1) Public Affairs Offices should be staffed by career professionals protected by civil service rules, not headed by political appointees, (2) the practice of the White House OMB reviewing scientific testimony should be dropped.

These changes would be simple to make, they would allow the public to be better informed, the government would have a more complete picture for making decisions, the tax payers would get their money's worth. So why doesn't it happen? Because, when a new Administration comes in they say "Hey, now WE can control the Offices of Propaganda (even though they consider them offices of their enlightened truth) and make OUR administration look good!

What is needed is a bi-partisan agreement that these changes would be in the interest of the nation. But it is just not going to happen unless the public gets involved. Politicians do not give up instruments of political power AFTER an election that they have won, unless they made an unambiguous promise before the election. We should be asking the candidates for President "will you make these two specific changes, to take the politics out of scientific reporting?" And then we must check to see that the changes are made when a new administration takes over.

Well, I failed to expound on the relation between the threat to our democracy and the threat to our planet, but I am running out of gas and need to work on a scientific paper. The relation is discussed in (http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/worldwatch_nov2006.pdf), and better in Bowen's "Censoring Science" (Dutton, 2008). Would you believe that the current head of NASA PAO had a senior position in the Southern Company, the second largest holding company of coal-burning utilities in the United States? Naw, just kidding. Or am I? Read the book.

Free lunch. At the AAAS meeting in Boston on Saturday February 16, I am receiving their Award for Scientific Freedom and Responsibility. There are still a couple of free seats at my table where I can identify people to take them, so if you are attending AAAS or in the neighborhood and interested, let me know. No guarantees, it might be rubber chicken, but it has become hard to find free lunch these days.