

Detroit News Editorial, 22 November, 1989

“Loads of Media Coverage”

On the one hand, as scientists we are ethically bound to the scientific method. ... On the other hand, we are not just scientists but human beings as well. ... To avert the risk (of potentially disastrous climate change) we need to get some broad based support, to capture the public imagination. That of course means getting loads of media coverage. So we have to offer up some scary scenarios, make simplified dramatic statements and little mention of any doubts one might have. ... Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective, and being honest.

--Stephen H. Schneider, author of the book *Global Warming* (Sierra Club), in an interview in *Discover Magazine*, October 1989.

The next time you hear about some scary environmental horror on the nightly news, keep that quote in mind. It goes far to explain the debasement of American environmental science into cheap political theater. Apparently “being honest” is no longer the test of a good scientist. It must be balanced” with “being effective.”

Stephen Schneider is a government-funded climatologist who has become the lion of Capital Hill. He is invited to most conferences and congressional hearings on the subject of global warming, and he does indeed receive “loads of media coverage” in stories about climate change. In his book he warns that the earth is heating up, creating a greenhouse effect of catastrophic proportions.

Yet, two decades ago, Mr. Schneider was among those actively warning of a returning Ice Age. He used many of the same arguments he now uses to support his thesis that the earth is heating up. Cold, hot, who cares? Environmental extremists often seem more interested in scaring the bejabbers out of the American public than in getting at the real facts.

A growing body of research suggests that global warming may soon go the way of global cooling. Massachusetts Institute of Technology researchers Reginald Newell, Jane Hsiung and Wu Zhongxiang, have conducted a survey of the world’s ocean temperature data since the mid-19th century. Their conclusion in the latest issue of *Technology Review*: “One of the most striking results suggested by the data is that there appears to have been little or no global warming over the past century.”

The MIT study confirms the major 1988 study of the U.S. land-based record since 1893 by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration released last January. That showed there has been no warming trend in the 48 contiguous states in 100 years.

Serious climatologists, as opposed to the environmental fanatics who are given prominent play in newspapers and on television, are not surprised. As Andrew Solow of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute told *The News* last summer, “based on what we know now, there is absolutely no hard evidence that the enhanced greenhouse effect has arrived.” Mr. Solow represents the consensus of 61 leading climatologists who make up the respected International Climate Trends Panel.

How then have we been sold such a bill of goods? One of the reasons is there are a few scientists like Mr. Schneider prepared to play fast and loose not only with the truth but with the public psyche. He knows that the media’s basic grist is fear and calamity. What is troubling is that Mr. Schneider is completely funded by your taxpayer dollars through the National Science Foundation which underwrites the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo.

It’s time for Congress to take a hard look at the manner in which those taxpayer dollars are being used.

It's also time for the media to take a hard look at the sources for some of its more lurid stories about the environment.

The media is quick to suspect scientific bias when research is underwritten by corporations. It should be equally suspicious of science underwritten by government bureaucrats and scientists with a vested interest in a certain outcome.

If the scientific community isn't armed with a better moral compass than Mr. Schneider, it will soon find its credibility in serious trouble. Then, like the little boy who cried wolf too often, nobody will pay attention when a really scary scenario arrives on our doorsteps.

Detroit News Editorial Response, 5 December, 1989, P. 10A.

Rebuttal: News Plays Fast and Loose With the Facts

Most News readers would assume that such a serious attack on the integrity of a scientist would be based on exhaustive research to back up the charges. What The News offers instead is an out-of-context quote attributed to me from a secondary source (interview with Discover magazine) and a false statement of my views from the early 1970s, in which I purportedly was "among those actively warning of a returning ice age. He used many of the same arguments he now uses to support his thesis that the earth is heating up. Cold, hot, who cares?"

No source is given for the latter assertion of my supposed views.

WHAT WERE MY VIEWS in the 1970s? I opposed those arguing that a new ice age was imminent, and instead argued forcibly in my first book, *The Genesis Strategy* that society needed to be prepared to deal with climatic variability in both directions, I called it the "genesis strategy" after Joseph's advice to the Pharaoh to store grain in the seven fat years for the seven lean years. Thus, The News' premise of my "hot or cold, who cares" is blatantly false.

Since the News devoted several column inches in its editorial to partially quote that Discover Magazine reported I had said, The News must feel this is important. Therefore, let me set the record straight by quoting the entire paragraph from Discover, since what The News left out (in italics below) seriously misrepresents the totality of my views:

"On the one hand, as scientists we are ethically bound to the scientific method, in effect promising to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but – which means that we must include all doubts, the caveats, the ifs, ands and buts. On the other hand, we are not just scientists but human beings as well. And like most people we'd like to see the world a better place, which in this context translates into our working to reduce the risk of potentially disastrous climate change. To do that we need to get some broad based support, to capture the public's imagination. That, of course, means getting loads of media coverage. So we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified, dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we might have. This "double ethical bind" we frequently find ourselves in cannot be solved by any formula. Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest. I hope that means being both."

It is strange that The News should accuse me of trying to hide scientific uncertainty through this quote, when by the very nature of explaining the dilemma I am being unusually forthright in trying to show how all scientists face a bind when forced to communicate in short sound bites in the media what the essence of a controversial complex problem is.

IT IS HARD to imagine how this constitutes hiding the truth when it's plainly stated. Obviously, the absence of the last sentence of the Discover magazine quote in the editorial totally misrepresents my views. Ironically, The Detroit News quoted me as the "good guy" several years ago in an editorial on "Nuclear Autumn" (June 30, 1986), a term I coined in toning down the nuclear winter debate.

In that editorial, Carl Sagan was portrayed by The News as the evil overstater, and Starley Thompson and I, the wise and circumspect cautious scientists. I never have, and still do not believe or say that ends justify the means or that truth should be abandoned for a good cause – and what cause is more compelling than making nuclear war and its horrors more publicly known?

What I mean by the "double ethical bind" was not even represented in the Discover quote, which only provided a partial snapshot of my views. The "bind" that scientists face is that it is impossible to expect a complicated issue to be fully elaborated on in the public and popular media and thus a scientist who tries to explain to non-specialists the nature of controversial science, particularly that with policy implications, has to find a means to communicate effectively and honestly. To me that means using familiar metaphors.

For example, I use the metaphor of loaded dice to illustrate why we couldn't attribute the very hot summer of 1988 to a century of greenhouse gas buildups in the atmosphere: That is, even if there were certain evidence of global warming this century (which I have never claimed), one year tells us nothing concrete about long-term trends.

THE PROBLEM with secondary sources is that they often do not represent one's totality of views. The Discover quote did not present the context of the double ethical bind as described in my writings. Let me show what I really believe by quoting from a reliable source of my views, my own book *Global Warming* (which, ironically, The Detroit News cited in its editorial but apparently never read). "There is no simple formula for resolving the dilemma of balancing effectiveness against full disclosure, for one scientist's clear simplification could well be another's irresponsible oversimplification. Each tries to find the best path across this treacherous ethical ground."

Finally, contrary to the impression in the editorial, the vast majority of atmospheric researchers are in agreement that substantial, even unprecedented, climatic changes are quite possible in the next century. This has been affirmed and re-affirmed by some half dozen U.S. National Academy of Sciences studies, as well as by a comparable number of studies by Canadians, Australians and United Nations groups.

For The Detroit News to cite a few recent anti-global warming articles that have yet to be published in strictly refereed climatological journals and not to mention the many consensus statements made by responsible scientific assessment bodies such as the National Academy of Sciences is, frankly, sloppy at best and irresponsible journalism at worst. And by the way, all those studies, as in all my public statements or writings, are clear that many uncertainties remain over the timing, magnitude and detailed consequences of the unprecedented buildup of greenhouse gases.

Unfortunately, the only definitive proof of the detailed nature of future climatic change is to perform the experiment on the only "laboratory" we have: the earth itself. In my value system that is not a wise gamble, given the many steps that could be taken to slow down the rate of greenhouse pollution.

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