
STATE OF THE ART

A SURVEY OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY, BY THE EDITORS

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Censoring Scientists?

Lessons of the James Hansen Affair

The latest high-profile controversy over the proper relationship between science and politics involves James Edward Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York City, who claims he was muzzled by the Bush administration. Hansen is a respected climate researcher, one of the world's top experts. He is regularly published in leading scientific journals and is a mainstay at conferences on climate change. He attained international renown after testifying on global warming before Congress in 1988, telling legislators that "it's time to stop waffling so much and say the evidence is pretty strong that the greenhouse effect is here." He has been widely and routinely quoted in the news media ever since.

On January 29, 2006, the *New York Times* published a front-page arti-

cle about Hansen: "Climate Expert Says NASA Tried to Silence Him." According to Hansen, as the *Times* reported, "officials at NASA headquarters had ordered the public affairs staff to review his coming lectures, papers, postings on the Goddard website and requests for interviews from journalists." In a video interview on the *Times* website, Hansen said that "in my thirty-some years of experience in government, I've never seen control to the degree that is occurring now, and I think that it's just very harmful to the way that a democracy works. We have to inform the public if they're going to make the right decisions and influence policymakers."

Specifically, the *Times* told of a low-level NASA public-affairs official, George Carlton Deutsch III, who had apparently been involved in attempt-

ing to filter Hansen's contact with the press. In a kind of mild patronage familiar to Washingtonians, Deutsch was offered his position at NASA after having worked for President Bush's reelection campaign and inaugural committee. More details of Deutsch's clumsy interference with the public presentation of NASA science soon came to light, and about a week after the story broke, he resigned his position. (Around that time, it was revealed that Deutsch's résumé falsely claimed he had graduated from college.) Shortly after his resignation, Deutsch complained to reporters that "Dr. Hansen and his supporters have a very partisan agenda and ties reaching to the top of the Democratic Party. Anyone perceived to be a Republican, a Bush supporter or a Christian is singled out and labeled a threat to their views. I encourage anyone interested in this story to consider the other side, to consider Dr. Hansen's true motivations and to consider the dangerous implications of only hearing out one side of the global warming debate." (Hansen responded with a statement calling Deutsch's claims "nonsense" and describing his own political inclinations as "moderately conservative.")

NASA's response to the controversy was swift. Soon after the original *Times* story was published, Administrator Michael Griffin sent a memo to all NASA employees affirming the agency's "commitment to openness." On March 30, 2006, NASA announced a new public-information policy, updating and clarifying rules last changed

in 1991. The new policy, Griffin said, "guarantees that NASA scientists may communicate their conclusions to the media, but requires that they draw a distinction between professional conclusions and personal views that may go beyond the scope of their specific technical work, or beyond the purview of the agency."

Let us ignore the question of whether Hansen—who has built up extensive media contacts over the last two decades, and who is evidently capable of obtaining front-page *New York Times* coverage for the airing of his grievances—was ever really in danger of having his access to the press significantly impaired. And let us ignore the question, much discussed by conservative critics of Hansen at the height of the controversy, of the appropriateness of Hansen's decision to endorse John Kerry publicly in the 2004 presidential campaign. Setting those matters aside, what are we to make of this entire affair, and what does it say about the role of scientists in public life?

The first thing that must be stressed is that the controversy relates only to *public* information. There seem to be no serious allegations that strictly *scientific* communication was in any way altered, filtered, or muzzled. This distinction is critically important. Tampering with or hampering scientific communication—submissions to journals and the like—would be a grave offense, undermining the very cornerstone of science. But interfering with a government scientist's public communication—restricting his radio interviews,

for instance, as Deutsch apparently did Hansen's—is surely a lesser offense, especially when the subject is not just the scientific facts but what society should do about them. This is a murkier area, at the intersection of science, politics, and policy, and it raises complicated questions about the difficulties of presenting technical information so that the public can understand it, fairly explaining those areas of science that remain unsettled, and judiciously communicating scientific facts that relate to hot-button political disputes. These questions are not easy to answer. They never have been.

Which brings us to a second major point worth remembering: This kind of controversy isn't really new. Hansen himself has made similar complaints in the past, going at least as far back as May 1989. Other scientists at different government agencies across multiple administrations of both political parties have grumbled about restrictions on their communication with the public. The universality of these complaints in no way exculpates Deutsch, but it does make clear that this is a systemic institutional problem—one inseparable from the participation of technical experts in our government—that defies tidy resolution.

Indeed, a closer examination of some of Hansen's public speeches reveals that problem quite clearly. In his public remarks, Hansen regularly emphasizes the fact that he is speaking as an individual and a scientist, not in his capacity as a government official, and that as an objective scientist he should refrain

from commenting on policy matters. For example, at a speech he delivered at the New School in February, during the height of the controversy, Hansen said, "I am speaking as a scientist based on my thirty-some years of experience in NASA, but I am not speaking for the agency or the government; these are my personal scientific opinions." He added:

I do not attempt to define policy, which is up to the people and their elected representatives, and I don't criticize policies. The climate science has policy relevance, but I let the facts speak for themselves about consequences for policymakers.... There is a good rationale for preventing scientists from intruding in policymaking. The converse is also true. Policy should not intrude in science, or it will destroy the quality of the science and diminish the value of the science to the public.

But in the same speech, Hansen explicitly addressed policy questions. "I intend to show," he said, "that the answer to the question 'Can we still avoid dangerous human-made climate change' is yes, we could, but we are not now on a path to do that, and if we do not begin actions to get on a different path within the next several years we will pass a point of no return, beyond which it is impossible to avoid climate change with far-ranging undesirable consequences." He went on to argue that "special interests have been a roadblock wielding undue influence over policymakers. The special interests seek to maintain short-term prof-

its with little regard to either the long-term impact on the planet that will be inherited by our children and grandchildren or the long-term economic well-being of our country.”

So which is it? Should scientists opine on policy matters or play at agnosticism? Should they offer their own political analysis, as Hansen did by complaining about “special interests” in this speech and others, or not? For complicated subjects like climate change—which, as the astute academic Daniel Sarewitz has pointed out, brings together problems of “climate impacts, biodiversity, land use, energy use, water use, agricultural productivity, public health, economic development, demographics, and so forth”—should scientists mention the limits of their expertise?

This is not just a controversy about putting restrictions on scientists who give public speeches or interviews. It is, more deeply, a controversy about the responsibilities of scientists whose technical knowledge gives them enormous authority in modern society. Government scientists, especially—accountable to no electorate, but in

positions of public trust—must wield that authority with utmost circumspection.

The Hansen affair is also yet another example of the limits of science to settle policy questions: Knowing the facts, which themselves are often in dispute, does not settle the best course of action. How much economic pain are we willing to endure to prevent the potential dangers of global warming? To what extent are we willing to limit freedom and expand the regulatory power of government to reduce greenhouse gases? How do environmental concerns relate to other urgent problems, whether the looming crisis of entitlements or the threat of a nuclear Iran? Many scientists, experts in their own sub-disciplines, come to think that the “crisis” they know best is the only crisis that matters, and they demand that all “enlightened” politicians govern accordingly. But in reality, democracy, informed by science but not ruled by it, is more enlightened than scientists alone. This fact is often forgotten amid all the endless chatter about “politicizing science.”