

How to climb out of a hole

Bob Ward has some advice for climate scientists

It has been a bad few months for the public profile of climate science.

In November 2009, emails hacked from the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia (UEA) were posted on the internet, prompting accusations of misconduct by some of the world's leading researchers. Three separate investigations were launched, and although no evidence of fraud was found, the researchers were heavily criticised for a lack of transparency.

In addition, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) admitted in January 2010 that its last report in 2007 was wrong to predict that Himalayan glaciers could disappear by 2035. It subsequently faced allegations of further errors in its report and an independent review of its operations and processes.

Both controversies sparked hostile and negative media coverage in the UK and across the world, and raised questions about the general integrity and competence of climate researchers.

But climate researchers have helped to turn these academic controversies into crises of confidence by failing to communicate effectively.

Flawed strategies

Some have decided that the best strategy is to keep quiet, hoping the problems will all blow over and that there will be no lasting impact on public opinion. But they have overlooked the fact that this looks to many in the outside world like guilty silence.

Some have blamed journalists for hysterical coverage, believing that environment reporters have sided with so-called 'sceptics' who reject some or most of climate science. But correspondents have instead been trying defend the science to editors who have accused them of 'going native' and ignoring the alleged wrongdoings of researchers.

And the institutions at the centre of the controversies have been perceived to be slow in responding to the allegations and reluctant to take appropriate action.

More confusion

It is not yet clear to what extent trust in climate researchers has suffered lasting damage from these controversies. But it is clear that more of the UK public are now confused about the causes and consequences of climate change.

A Populus opinion poll in February 2010 found that 25 per cent of the public believe that climate change is not happening, and a further 10 per cent think that man-made global warming is 'environmentalist propaganda for which there is little or no real evidence'.

Only 26 per cent felt that the risks of climate change and its possible consequences have been presented proportionately, compared with 38 per cent in early November 2009, prior to controversy enveloping UEA and the IPCC.

The survey in February found that 57 per cent had recently heard stories about 'flaws or weaknesses in the science of climate change'.

Communicate!

It is not just the reputations of the few scientists at the centre of the storm that is at stake, but of the profession as a whole. If the climate research community wants to repair the damage of the past few

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months, it must devote the time and effort required for a sustained communications campaign.

This means engaging with the public, the media and their critics, and demonstrating not only the high quality of their research, but also the high standards of their professional conduct. They must be prepared to acknowledge where mistakes have been made and where improvements are needed. And they have to show openness and a willingness to allow outside scrutiny to regain trust.

Senior researchers must lead by example. They should polish their communication skills and incorporate more public engagement activities into their busy schedules. Such investments should not be regarded as research resources that are wasted, but instead as new opportunities that are created to earn the greater confidence that is needed for continued public funding and support.



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Tales from the water cooler

Barrie Cadshaw reveals the movers and shakers in public engagement

Mover

John Holman is stepping down after six years in his role as Chief Executive of Myscience where he has been responsible for the National Science Learning Centre in York. He will continue lecturing in Chemistry at the University of York and pursue his interests in education and science. He will be replaced by Yvonne Baker, the current Chief Executive of STEMNET. Since the coalition government came into power there has been much speculation amongst the education community that STEMNET will be axed.

Hema Teji and **Toby Shannon** have joined the British Science Association as Regional Programmes Manager and Science in Society Officer respectively.

On the eve of the highly anticipated budget in June Fiona Godlee, Editor of the *British Medical Journal*, gave *Sense about Science's* annual lecture on challenging medical myths. She was extremely critical of the pharmaceutical industry – much to the annoyance of a former employee of a well-known pharmaceutical company who was seen to be spitting tacks at what he saw as the misrepresentation of the industry's position.

Later that evening, the Chair of *Sense about Science*, Dick Taverne, openly contradicted the organisation's Chief Executive, Tracey Brown. She envisaged the possibility that *Sense about Science* would not need to exist in 5 years' time, once its mission had been achieved.

Since the last issue of *People & Science*, the must-attend event of the public engagement calendar – the Science Communication Conference – has taken place. This year's keynote address, given by Tim Smit, Chief Executive and co-founder of the Eden Project, was particularly colourful. His view of science centres: 'I think most of them are crap, really, I mean profoundly crap and then there's the dominance of the middle-aged male who believes in interactivity, they believe in it but they've not actually done it themselves.' This was tweeted and retweeted, causing the Conference to appear in the top 10 'Top Tweets' rankings on Twitter that day.

In fact the air of the Conference was filled with the flutter of tiny tweets from start to finish, much to the annoyance of the Director of the Science Museum, Chris Rapley, who would have preferred Chatham House rules to keep his opinions within the four walls. His fellow speaker Bob Ward, from LSE's Grantham Centre, generated perhaps the most poetic tweet of the conference when he said, 'The talk about uncertainties in climate change has become the language of inaction.'

The 'scientific literacy lessons for all new Conservative MPs' previewed by Adam Afriyie MP, the then Conservative Party's Minister for Science, in the March 2010 issue of *People & Science*, turns out to have been voluntary, not compulsory, and in the form of one session of a panel with David Willetts and science Lords including Robert Winston. Only 11 MPs went and they weren't all Conservatives.

The latest murmurings at the watercooler suggest that there are many professional scientists who are hopping mad at the news of Prince William (2:1 honours MA degree in Geography) being made an honorary Fellow of the Royal Society this summer. Who'd have thunk it.

Finally, how not to do it: a lesson from Monsanto. One of our finest rang them to ask about the Court of Justice's ruling against them. The firm had sued Dutch importers of soybean cattle feed made in Argentina from its Roundup Ready herbicide-resistant soybeans. The Argentine Government hasn't yet allowed Monsanto to charge farmers for the GM crops; so the firm pounced at the border on imports of cattle feed made with the crop on the grounds that the imports infringed European patents. The highest court in Europe disagreed. And what did Monsanto do to answer the journalist? Nothing. Never returned the call.

Do get in touch if you hear any tales at the water cooler that you'd like us to include in the next edition of *People & Science*.



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