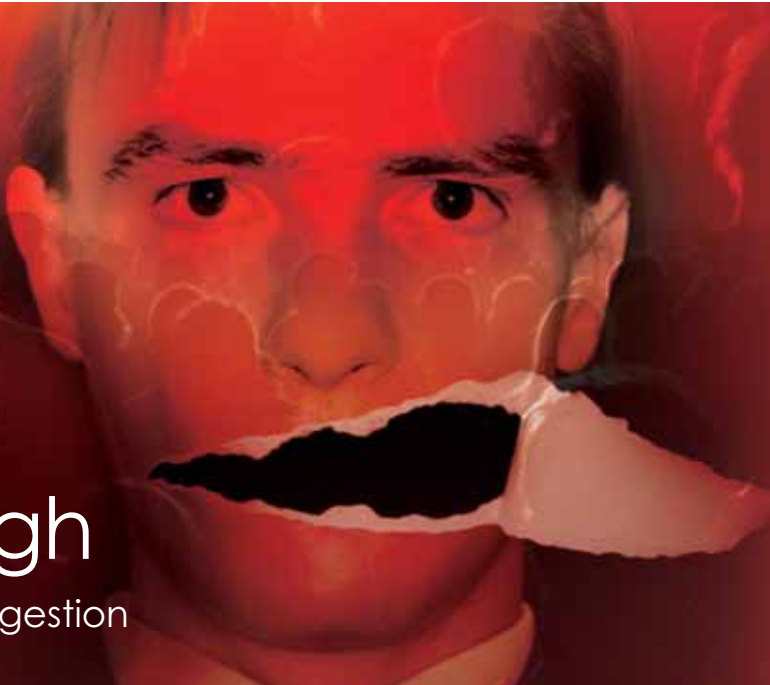


Helping Simon Singh

Howie Firth has a suggestion



I've followed Simon Singh's legal case in the columns of *New Scientist* and some supporting websites. As a former journalist, I've been on a couple of occasions very close to where he is now, and I can say that it's a horrible place to be. It doesn't matter how many people are with you or how much you believe in yourself – you can't get away from the fact that the outcome depends on factors outside your control, and all the time the legal costs are mounting and the risks multiplying.

If it was me, I'd say: find a way to withdraw that word 'bogus'. It's one thing to stand your ground on whether or not treatment is scientifically proven. But when you use a word like 'bogus' which the dictionaries say carries overtones of fraud and counterfeiting, then you risk being drawn off home ground and into the legal arena. I don't know much about the English laws of libel, but the Scots law of defamation makes it clear that if it's felt that you've made an implication about someone, however unintended it may be, then the onus is on you to prove it, which is not usually a good situation to be in.

What won't help Simon Singh personally and immediately will be a campaign to change the libel laws. Certainly other legal cases have added to arguments for overall reform, but that is going to be a long battle over years, while in the meantime his legal costs are mounting up.

Specific changes

If you want to persuade politicians to change the laws, then you have to spell out to them the exact changes. You have to point to specific sections of the laws and say how you would delete or rewrite them.

I've been trying to work this out and it's not easy. Would we simply exclude all discussions of science from the laws of libel, so that protagonists could say whatever they wanted about each others' views? Or would we focus on statements which were not scientifically proven, and exclude those who upheld them from the protection of the libel laws?

I'm approaching this question of rewriting the law as someone used to solving problems in science and in life in a logical and practical way, and it may be that I've missed something obvious – but I find it very hard to see what the solution is.

Agree protocols

However, there is something that the British Science Association could do to help Simon Singh directly and at the same time demonstrate to everyone in the UK the power of the scientific method. You could bring the parties around the table and challenge them to agree on a series of experiments which would objectively establish once and for all the merits or demerits of a range of chiropractic treatments. You could ask both parties to go through the details of the experimental methodology in advance in minute detail, and agree to accept the outcome, whatever that might be. You could also ask them to agree to put legal action into abeyance until the scientific outcome is available.

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I recognise there would be difficulties in agreeing on aspects such as experimental protocols and no doubt much else. But as people in some tough political situations around the world have shown, the existence of difficulties is no reason not to try to resolve them rationally. Patient facilitation, fair yet firm, is a key factor.

Most of all, this approach would enable scientific issues to be separated from legal ones in a positive and practical way, with science and the scientific method to the fore.



Dr Howie Firth directed the first Edinburgh Science Festival. By training a mathematical physicist, he has worked in education and journalism, and as an islands councillor had responsibilities for conflict resolution howie@orkney.com

Reflections on Climategate

Time to reassess the IPCC, says **Judith Curry**

The hacked emails from the University of East Anglia's Climate Research Unit (CRU) have opened up a Pandora's Box of issues surrounding the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The emails led to questions being asked about the validity of the IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report (AR4), whose key finding was that 'The warming in the climate system is unequivocal...'.

In defending the IPCC process and the content of the AR4, the IPCC principals apparently do not appreciate that the IPCC cannot regain public credibility simply by appealing to its own authority. While the emails themselves may turn out to have little impact on the actual substance of the Assessment Report, little things become bigger as they illuminate important truths.

Debate has deteriorated

The public perception of anthropogenic global warming as a planetary emergency probably peaked during the period 2005-2007 with Hurricane Katrina, the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, and release of the IPCC AR4. Since then, public interest has waned somewhat, the credibility of the IPCC has been shaken by the hacked CRU emails, and the effectiveness of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) for climate policy negotiation and implementation is being questioned. Climate change skepticism now focuses on whether or not the impacts of the warming are large and predominantly adverse, and whether anything can be done to ameliorate them. The public debate has deteriorated into attempts to discredit scientists and into competing lines of propaganda that are targeted at controlling policies rather than informing them.

Many scientists, genuinely concerned about the risks of climate change and its impacts (including myself), are disappointed in the outcomes of climate change policies to date. In the wake of Copenhagen and Climategate, it's time to reassess the objectives and process of the IPCC, and whether or not future IPCC assessments are actually needed.

Scientific base needs broadening

In my opinion, the IPCC assessments have framed the climate change problem too narrowly in the context of the UNFCCC policy objectives. There has been inadequate assessment of natural climate variability, land use changes, and their impacts.

Until about a decade ago, adaptation policy options were considered to be a diversion from the main UNFCCC policy objectives. Hence those contributing to the public discourse on climate change have found it far easier to conform to and elaborate upon the established UNFCCC agenda. What is needed now is a broadening of the base of scientific inquiry and an expansion of the policy options surrounding climate change.

Restoring credibility

So, whither the IPCC? It faces challenges to both its credibility and relevance. To restore the public perception of its integrity in the wake of the hacked CRU emails, the IPCC needs to make the assessment process more objective and scientifically watertight.

Restoring credibility to the IPCC assessment process should include: more openness and better balance in the selection of co-chairs, lead authors, and review editors; a more thorough review process; a team of inspector generals to oversee the process and investigate complaints; and educating the co-chairs and lead authors on the policy context of the IPCC and expectations for ethical behavior. In the light of the hacked emails, a rigorous scientific uncertainty estimate of the global surface temperature records (both instrumental and proxy) is needed. Too often in the IPCC Assessment Reports, expert judgment regarding probabilities is substituted for a scientifically rigorous analysis of the uncertainty.

The continued relevance of the IPCC is an even greater challenge. Continuing to conduct a literature review every five years, which is the current procedure, is not very useful. If the IPCC is to continue to be relevant, future assessment reports need to broaden the scientific scope of the climate change problem and support a broader range of policy options.



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