

Re: "Political Correctness" drives scientific errors

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.physics/2005-03/10439.html>

From: OG (owen_at_gwynnefamily.org.uk)

Date: 03/20/05

Date: Sun, 20 Mar 2005 02:47:22 -0000

"tadchem" <tadchemNOSPAM@comcast.net> wrote in message
news:UtydneRSAo1l16HfRVn-rg@comcast.com...
>
> "OG" <owen@gwynnefamily.org.uk> wrote in message
> news:3a1784F4khgk9U1@individual.net...
>>
>> "tadchem" <thomas.davidson@dla.mil> wrote in message
>> news:1111172819.139628.284530@o13g2000cwo.googlegroups.com...
>>> This is the same kind of thinking
>>
>> What "same kind of thinking" ?
>
> Ooops! It seems you have snipped the sentence that makes the entire
point of
> my post:
> "If you can ring enough alarms loud enough the grant money will flow."

OK, your original post was unclear.

As regards the "alarms => grants" claim.

Ah, if only it were so – it is well known that it is very difficult to raise grants to investigate 'suspected' hazards. You are a chemist, surely you know about this. The world splits into two camps – if there is big money involved, then hazards have to be proven **unambiguously**; whereas if there is no big money involvement, then the precautionary principal is involved "we cannot allow any risk", which (strangely) often works in the favour of big money.

> **That** kind of thinking is what I was referring to.
>
>> >that has driven bad science in the
>>> name of climate research, environmentalism, and some suspicious
>> medical
>>> studies...
>>
>> Just because you don't like the results of research don't mean its
'bad

sci.physics: Re: "Political Correctness" drives scientific errors

- > > *science*'.
- >
- > *My other (implied) point was the converse of this. Popular acclaim does not*
- > *validate bad science. Whether or not science is good is not dependent upon*
- > *ex post facto judgements. The flaws are inherent even before the original*
- > *MS is prepared. Often there are hidden assumptions that have not been*
- > *questioned, and perhaps should be.*

- > *My personal opinion of published results is not even mentioned here, so*
- > *please do not leap to conclusions – you are more likely than not to be*
- in*
- > *error.*
- >
- > *For example, the work of the confessed charlatan in this case was in many*
- > *cases directed at "obesity." There still is no clear consensus among*
- > *researchers about what *constitutes* obesity. The criteria for application*
- of the label to a specific subject are fluid. It currently appears that*
- > *'obesity' is being continually redefined to include an ever-larger*
- > *portion of the population, guaranteeing an apparent 'epidemic' as the*
- > *numbers of people included grow.*
- >
- > *Body weight is a measurable parameter, just like blood pressure of blood*
- > *sugar. It is something that physicians can easily 'get a handle on.'*
- > *Higher than average body weight is not necessarily a disorder of itself – it*
- > *is a *symptom.* There can be many different conditions that can result in*
- > *higher than average body weight, including poor diet, metabolic disorders,*
- > *and even parasitic infections. Virtually no research is being reported on*
- > *means to discriminate the various *causes* of obesity.*
- >
- > *There's more money to be made from treatments than from cures, anyway.*
- >
- > > *Get a copy of the 5th March New Scientist*
- >
- > *Not the most reliable of sources. It rates about even with Scientific*
- > *American and TV Guide for reliability in reporting.*

Did you read the article?

- > > *and read the Essay on Michael*
- > > *Crichton's State of Fear.*
- >
- > *The opinions of a professional crafter of fiction are to be given more*
- > *weight than a critical analysis of the research reports because...?*

Absolutely no reason that I can think of, but there are plenty of people who think otherwise.

Understandably, people's natural inclination is to give a stronger weighting to 'evidence' that supports their own view. As you have identified, this unfortunately gives opportunities for cheats and fraudsters; hence the importance of picking up unconscious bias or mistaken assumptions.

As regards the NS article, the author was commenting on how people pick up strange misunderstandings of historical events.

For example, 20 years ago the French Secret Services mined and sank the Greenpeace vessel Rainbow Warrior in an attempt to disrupt protests against nuclear bomb tests. The photographer Fernando Pereira drowned. He begins by noting that many times people expressed general support for his ideas but couldn't support the way that "Greenpeace blew up that French ship and murdered someone in New Zealand". Somehow, in the America of the 1990's there was a fairly widespread view that Greenpeace had sunk a French ship somewhere.

As I implied earlier, if you know your audience you can make claims that go unexamined because they match the preconceptions of the audience. For example, the character acting as the 'sceptical hero' in Crichton's book asserts that the IPCC conclusion of 'discernable human influence on global climate' was written into the report "after the scientists themselves had gone home". I imagine that many readers would take this at face value, and it seems that Crichton has similarly believed it. The article makes clear that there was a change, but this was to reduce the scale of the from "significant new findings since 1990" to "discernable changes" and this was done to satisfy Middle East oil ministry officials and allow a 'consensus' text.

People are happy to believe that having something "written into" the report invalidates it, when the real story is that the original scientists' report had been much stronger in its claims, and that the weaker summary was only accepted in preference to having no report at all.

- > > *As if money from oil and coal companies is going to pay for unbiased*
- > > *research.*
- >
- > *The money from sources with commercial agendas is no better or worse*
- > *than*
- > *money from sources with political agendas. The last US election*
- > *demonstrated that even professional pollsters were not above*
- > *representing*

sci.physics: Re: "Political Correctness" drives scientific errors

- > *their results in a manner that was more pleasant to the \$pon\$or\$ of the*
- > *polls.*

You seem to be treating commercial and political interests as though they were separate here.

- > *Research costs money, and can *only* be paid for by sources with large*
- > *amounts of discretionary funds. Researchers that fail to please their*
- > *patrons don't continue to get money.*
- >
- > *I am not worried about biased research so much as I am worried about*
- > *fraudulent research.*
- >
- > *Biased work, as long as it is competent and honest, is still*
- replicable and
- > *has its own value. Further investigations will reveal both the bias*
- and the
- > *value. The replications will strengthen the (true) conclusions of*
- even
- > *biased work.*

I wasn't aware we had a certification system for biased work – just so we know whether it is competent and honest.

- >
- > *Work that is fraudulent or incompetent is not replicable. It produces*
- > *conclusions that are contradicted by further work. The net result is*
- that a
- > *lot of money gets wasted not only in the initial bad science, but also*
- on
- > *the efforts to replicate the results – efforts that would never have*
- been
- > *made if the original researchers had been competent and honest, and if*
- the
- > *original reviewers of the work had been thoroughly critical in spite*
- of any
- > *pressures applied by popular interests.*

All science is subject to critical analysis. It is possible (in fact it is necessary) to treat all science as provisional and unconfirmed – However, this doesn't mean that you can dismiss it if it produces results that are capable of independent verification and consistent with other results. Big money's trick is to claim that the 'provisional and unconfirmed' status means that it cannot stand in the way of commercial and political interests.

- > *This wastes resources that could be put to more productive use.*
- Diversion
- > *of resources from productive lines of investigation such as adult stem*
- cell

Re: "Political Correctness" drives scientific errors

sci.physics: Re: "Political Correctness" drives scientific errors

- > *research towards something else, simply because it has more press appeal,*
- > *does a disservice to all.*
- >
- > *This is why the scientific method includes a requirement for replicability*
- > *of results.*

You specifically claim that "climate research, environmentalism, and some suspicious medical studies" are to be identified with "If you can ring enough alarms loud enough the grant money will flow."

Can we examine this for unconscious bias?

Since 'medical studies' was the original subject of the article, you seem to be keen to assert that climate research and environmentalism are subject to the same effect – i.e. that any claim will generate healthy research grants. Have you spoken to many climate researchers and general environmentalists about this, or is this just your prejudice? I also note that you make no claim about any other area of research, are they totally or partially exempt from the same "alarm => grant" effect? Some unconscious bias there perhaps?

Owen