

□ For *Universitas* Debatt section, invited by Ingrid Eidsheim Daae

## Should serial misinformers be hosted by the University?

“1. Reposition global warming as theory (not fact)” is the top listed item on a famous 1991 memo by the Western Fuels Association, a US coal industry lobbying group. So began one of the most successful anti-science campaigns of all times, very much alive today. Using what is called the *tobacco strategy*, the industry created alternative narratives (“global warming is good for you”), hired fake experts (e.g. Fred S. Singer), and used a massive media campaign to undermine climate science and discredit scientists. The objectives were clear: Protect the fossil fuels industry interests by “shaping public opinion on a national scale”. They succeeded.

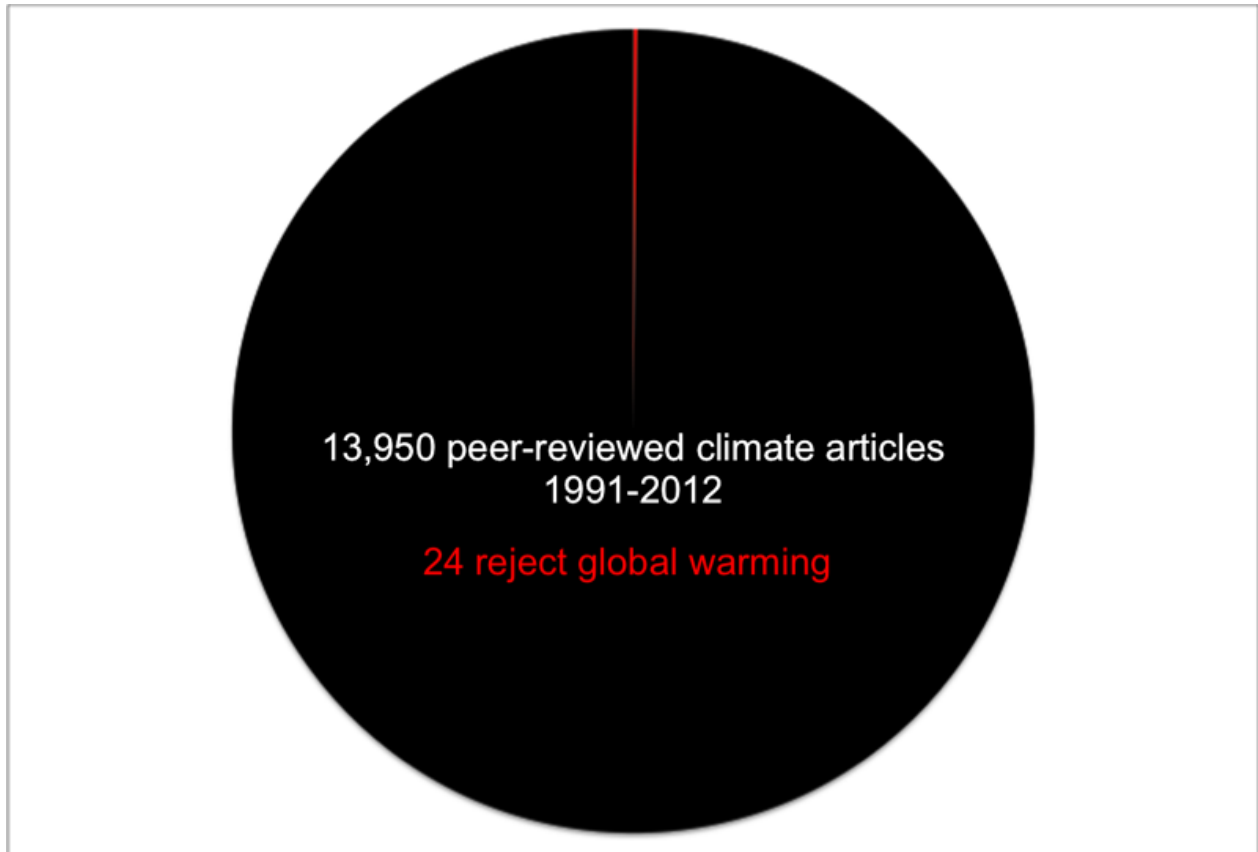
Throughout the last two decades conservative think tanks have used the tobacco strategy so effectively that to this day, public opinion on whether global warming is an established fact, lacks grotesquely behind the scientific consensus. Working from the tobacco strategy’s main tenet, “doubt is our product ...”, the initial strategy quickly morphed into full-blown denial, later assisted by the rapid development of the internet allowing the instant and broad spread of misinformation. Today, many countries have their own version of this campaign and its “Merchants of Doubt” (N. Oreskes & E. Conway, Bloomsbury Press, 2010). Norway has *Klimarealistene*.

Scientists were not prepared for this onslaught. We are generally a more introvert folk. We built our work on the *scientific method*, and publish and discuss science in scientific journals, not the popular press. As US scientists became verbally harassed and denigrated in the mid-90ies, it slowly dawned on them what they were up against. When I first moved to the US in 1998, I was astonished about the prevalence of misinformation outside scientific circles. Reading “The heat is on” (R. Gelbman, Basic Books, 1998) explained what had happened. This and other exposés of the well-organized and well-funded climate science denial operation led the way to scientists beginning to defend their work in, and to explain it to a broader public. Today, in the internet age, there are numerous websites such as RealClimate or SkepticalScience designed to explaining climate science and debunking misinformation.

Why would anyone question the science? Motives differ, but as Naomi Oreskes convincingly lays out, a generally strong believe in free market mechanisms, combined with strong anti-government/personal freedom attitudes, stirs fears that responding to the threat of climate change may cause disruptive and unacceptable societal changes. As a result, the political convictions of this minority get expressed in misrepresenting the science. Although these so-called “contrarians” have no scientific leg to stand on, they are a very vocal, unapologetic minority, not afraid to promote and spread their opinions widely. For example, last fall *Klimarealistene* send a folder containing their misinformed opinions “doubting” climate science to numerous schools and libraries throughout Norway, as well as to parliament members. CICERO was forced to mail clarification letters in response.

Make no mistake, the doubt strategy is a well-rehearsed and effective tool of denial. It played again last week when *Klimarealistene* hosted a speaker who has minimal-to-zero relevant research publications in climate science, but is a professor (the “fake expert” strategy, following an API memo from 1998). They again sought and were given a highly credible venue at the university, so as to rely on its good name. The

professor gave a lecture that would not survive expert scrutiny, or be torn to shreds if accepted at a serious conference or given as a departmental seminar for experts. Bottom line: a very unbalanced presentation intended not to convince experts, but to confuse people unfamiliar with the topic, including those unassuming reporters in the back. Universities already familiar with these tactics avoid having their name misused this way. No way such a talk would be allowed use of venue at Stanford. Yet, UiO is happy to host. Doubt anyone?



<http://desmogblog.com/2012/11/15/why-climate-deniers-have-no-credibility-science-one-pie-chart>

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