'The government is following the science': Why is the translation of evidence into policy generating so much controversy?

In the UK, the government has presented itself as guided by scientific evidence in its policy responses to COVID-19. This has led to science, in particular epidemiology, itself becoming politicised and contested. However, neither the politicisation of science nor questions surrounding the status of evidence are new. In this post, Luis Pérez-González, outlines how a similar politics of expertise has played out in environmental policy-making. The author argues that for scientific evidence to be successfully communicated in policy, it needs to be informed by bipartisan values.

'The government is following the science' is one of the most memorable soundbites to have emerged from the UK's COVID-19 daily briefings. But as the pandemic continues to sweep across the world, ministers have been confronted with rising scepticism about the efficacy of their attempts to combat the spread of the pandemic and growing anger at the economic toll of science-based policies, which are perceived to be prioritising public health over jobs. Tensions driven by clashing value judgements are becoming more apparent by the day.

Against this backdrop of escalating social discontent, ministers' data-intensive media appearances, where they are often flanked by scientific advisors, have become an important platform to negotiate public trust. By rehabilitating experts in the public eye, politicians are capitalising on expert knowledge to assert the legitimacy of their policies, while at the same time retaining the capacity to dodge accountability and shift blame when the public, for example, questions the quality of the scientific basis for restrictions.

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Image 1

The politics of expertise in climate science

The emergence of epidemiology as a site of public confrontation is not without precedents. Competing views on how to manage the trade-off between the economy and public health or whether to strengthen regulations of lobbying activity by stakeholders and interest groups have long contributed to turning climate science into a site of ideological and political polarisation. Both of these contested scientific domains ultimately illustrate the impact that the changing politics of expertise are having on the production of techno-scientific evidence.

For decades, political and corporate stakeholders on the sceptic side of the climate debate have animated controversy on environmental policy-making in varied and bold ways. Rather than following the science, they have selected and weaponised scientific evidence to prop up their narratives, with some even going as far as to intervene in the process of knowledge creation by investing selectively in research that serves their political and economic interests.

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Likewise, a turn to activist knowledge in a range of social movements has empowered ordinary citizens to intervene in the climate science debate, claiming recognition for the experience-based, grounded knowledge that they have accrued over time. The insight that scientific knowledge cannot be decoupled from the circumstances surrounding its construction has contributed to democratising climate science and extending participation in environmental policy-making beyond the control of accredited scientists.

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Blog-based science or science-based blogs

The blogosphere is one of the arenas where the contestation of climate knowledge, the (de-)legitimisation of traditional forms of expertise and the articulation of alternative translations of evidence into policy are being played out. My recently published study of the Anglophone climate blogosphere draws on a corpus of blogs that reflects the multivoiced nature of the climate change debate and includes material produced from a range of competing perspectives, not limited to the 'alarmist' and 'denier' poles.

In my study, blogs posted by a range of Australian self-proclaimed experts on climate science, defenders of the traditional scientific method and US lobbyists avowing to 'play scientists' are categorised as climate change contrarians. Their **blog-based science** sets out to challenge the scientific consensus embodied in the IPCC reports and the national policies emanating from the panel's recommendations.

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Climate change acceptors included in my sample of **science-based blogs** feature British journalists and researchers seeking to fight climate change misinformation by 'drawing on facts and hard evidence'. Significantly, my sample of acceptor voices also includes those of US-based credentialled scientists seeking to mount a challenge against the interference of the Trump administration in the production and communication of climate science.

In the context of my study, blog-based science is the work of science-aware members of the public endeavouring to challenge technocratic decision-making by consensus scientists or 'warmists'. Science-based bloggers, on the other hand, aim to expose lobbying and spin around climate change and other environmental issues. Specifically, credentialled scientists blog to retain control over the climate knowledge circulating in the public arena, driven by their perception that Anglophone mainstream media give sceptical voices more prominent coverage than would be warranted by the weight of the evidence supporting their claims.

The role of values in blog-based science

My analysis – which focuses on bloggers' use of terms like 'bias', 'dogma' and 'peer-review' – found that blog-based science attempts to undermine mainstream scientific consensus by drawing attention to what they perceive as the latter's alignment with institutional policies, corporate interests or left-wing agendas at odds with national interests.

In contrarian outlets, climate change is conflated with 'dogma'. Their narratives contend that a single, unquestioning belief has taken over climate science, to the detriment of critical scrutiny. Further, they frame the use of science by mainstream climate change experts as a cloak to conceal the flaws of their dogma – often referring to credentialled climate science as 'dogma science' or the 'dogma of settled science'.

In their posts, contrarian bloggers frame the 'inherent biases' of the consensus science as value-driven flaws. Rather than singling out specific procedural flaws in the production and evaluation of climate change knowledge, contrarian bloggers opt to decry the 'politicization of consensus science' – where values shape the research process from its very early stages.

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Image 2

For the contrarian set, the climate change dogma is politicised and does not lend itself to scrutiny; it demands being accepted as undisputed truth and stands in opposition to scientific research that contradicts this dogma. Ultimately, consensus scientists subscribing to the climate change dogma are therefore ‘blinded’ and ‘brainwashed’ by it.

By contrast, the term ‘dogma’ hardly occurs in my data set of science-based blogs by climate acceptors. When it occurs, it does so as part of statements by contrarian authoritarian voices that are quoted verbatim by journalists fighting climate change misinformation.

My study brings into sharp relief the implications of this focus on values for public perceptions of climate change science and other emerging areas of evidence controversy. It supports ongoing research within policy-making studies on the potential contribution that value-laden models of science could make to environmental governance.

A pragmatic reframing of policy-making informed by bipartisan values may prove to be an effective intervention in public debate without inflaming the climate science debate further. It could play a similar role in informing the increasingly fractious health-versus-economy, and freedom-versus-common good debates.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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