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WHITE PAPER

It's 2020, and Time
To Celebrate (and
Protect) Academic
Climate Advocacy for
Evidence and Facts

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**CENTER & FOR
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POLICY RESEARCH**



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1. INTRODUCTION (TO A FRAUGHT SITUATION)

'Advocacy' in academia has unfortunately become a dirty word in many quarters. It can be unsettling for numerous reasons:

- precarity of one's academic research position
- susceptibility of one's institution to funding pressures
- a feeling of inundation already in one's job by the time-pressures involved in other aspects of their roles as researchers
- reticence to take on new and extra tasks in an already busy professional (and personal) life
- fear of risking one's individual or institutional scientific credibility
- reluctance to pull time and energy from one's core passions of research (in a time limited environment)
- discomfort with potential peer or public backlash
- acknowledgement that one simply is not a good communicator of one's research (and possibly their teaching)

These complexities are real and must be taken into account. Frankly, engagement construed as 'advocacy' clearly is not for everyone, especially in the highly contentious and highly politicized United States (US) arena.

As a result, in 2020 we find that many consequently choose to avoid the treacherous waters of advocacy, broadly construed, for fear of undertow.

However, individual and institutional choices have consequences. In a 21st century communications environment, it is important to understand that those who feel their work is done once they have done the field research, and have written up and published their findings are actually those trapped in a 20th century mindset.

It can be soothing and comfortable to take that view.

But as a result of views and (in) actions like these, there has emerged an 'engagement gap' where many relevant expert researchers choose to 'self-silence' rather than speak out on critical issues they know a great deal about (Lewandowsky et al, 2015). And at times when academic researchers do speak out, there can be a tendency to actually underplay threats so as to avoid appearing alarmist or extreme. Keynyn Brysse, Naomi Oreskes, Jessica O'Reilly and Michael Oppenheimer have called this 'erring on the side of least drama' (Brysse et al, 2013).

In a 21st century communications environment, it is important to understand that those who feel their work is done once they have done the field research, and have written up and published their findings are actually those trapped in a 20th century mindset.

However, in 2020 I argue that more substantive engagement and 'advocacy' is needed among many of us academic researchers so that the scale of the climate challenges are met with some semblance of a commensurate response. Academic researchers are on solid ground when advocating for facts, evidence and truth(s) and allowing this to be conflated with advocacy for specific policies or getting involved in 'impure' activities is damaging to our ongoing efforts over the medium-to-long-term.

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Perhaps we needn't worry as much – as individuals, as institutions – that we tend to

do. In fact, John Kotcher and colleagues found that "Climate scientists can safely engage in public dialogue about policy matters"... "and in certain forms of advocacy without directly harming their credibility or the credibility of the scientific community" (2017, 9) and "Climate scientists advocating for action broadly may not harm their credibility" (2017, 12).

2. WHAT IS ACADEMIC CLIMATE ADVOCACY?

Some of the reticence I describe stems from a substantial amount of confusion and conflation within the academic community about different points of entry into this world of 'advocacy'. Mixed in here are also ingredients about what may be the 'right' or 'appropriate' place for academic researchers to enter these worlds. What results is often anxiety about how to navigate these often high-profile, high-stakes and highly-politicized spaces of engagement at the science-policy interface and in the public sphere.

In a book I recently wrote called 'Creative (Climate) Communications: Productive Pathways for Science, Policy and Society' (2019), I worked to clarify and cleave nodes of advocacy across a spectrum, as I mapped out a basic taxonomy of academic advocacy through the case study of climate change science, policy and cultural action.

In the book I sought to recapture solid ground on which researchers can then stand on when considering their varied involvement in the public sphere.

- **Type 0 advocacy** = those who choose to stay away from any semblance of advocacy, due to confusion and conflation of perceptions of academic advocacy in the public sphere; this appearance of inaction is in fact a choice or action
- **Type I advocacy** = advocacy for (scientific) evidence, facts and truth: this approach also advocates for the intersecting ways in which experiential, emotional, and aesthetic information informs scientific ways of knowing about climate change
- **Type II advocacy** = advocacy for policy outcomes: this approach promotes particular decisions (e.g. environmental policies or legislation) based on evidence ascertained its

various forms to know about climate change; one strain of this type of advocacy may then involve advocacy for particular political parties that advance preferred policies

These types of advocacy are not meant to be interpreted as a binary or blunt interpretations of varied stakes and contexts (across time and places). Rather, these represent distinct nodes across a spectrum of chosen engagements.

Through defining these nodes across a spectrum, I do not suggest that academic researchers will slot statically into one node or the other. There is dynamism in these flavors of engagement across issues and over time, along with a range from low- to high-stakes situations, all possibly experienced by the same academic researcher. Moreover, this is not just about frequency of advocacy but *efficacy*.

Understanding this spectrum can help to strengthen rather than tarnish the reputation of science through politically-relevant advocacy and activism.

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Science advocates in Copley Square in February 2017 for a Rally to Stand up for Science. Photo Credit: Jessica Rinaldi/The Boston Globe.

There are many contemporary examples of ways in which individuals and institutions grapple with whether or how to engage in advocacy. As one example, we can consider the 'Marches for Science' that have taken place in recent years. To date, these marches have been a coordinated set of rallies held near Earth Day (April 22). These were first organized amid a backdrop of increased mobilizations in the US and around the world (like the January 2017 'Women's March').

Other satellite events have included a 'Rally to Stand Up for Science' outside the 2017 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting. Climate researchers who participated in these marches for science took 'steps' from talk to action.

These were marches not organized for a specific cause or policy, but for advocacy for the integrity of scientific inquiry. At the 2018 March for Science, journalist Suan Svrluga from *The Washington*

Post reported “A few people chanted “Science is real. It’s not how you feel,” beating a tempo on buckets, but mostly the mass of people marched through Washington quietly Saturday, letting their homemade signs show their support for empirical research” (Svrluga, 2018).

Many signs declared the need for facts, evidence and truth from science to inform policy (Figure 1). Survey work on the marches and marchers found that 89% marched because they wanted more evidence in policy decisions (Myers et al, 2018).

But other academic researchers found themselves uncomfortable participating or chose not to participate at all due to the reasons stated at the outset of this piece, and due to a sense of unclear demarcations

between advocacy for scientific-evidence, or advocacy for particular policies or even advocacy against US President Donald J. Trump. In fact at the marches, calls for a return to evidence-based policymaking and funding for scientific research moved at times from general statement and signs to explicit linkages to the Trump administration’s suppression and side lining of science.

Because of this slippage in the public view, critiques then poured in from many different perspectives. For examples, sociologist Robert Brulle argued that by placing climate scientists as leading spokespeople for climate change action, “it fed into and exacerbated the existing polarized divide” rather than bridging it (2018, p. 3). Meanwhile, physicist Jim Gates opined that “such a politically-charged event might send a message to the public that scientists are driven by ideology more than by evidence” (Flam, 2017).

3. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR?

My recent book catalogued relevant social science and humanities scholarship to better understand which creative climate communications work where, when, why and under what conditions and audiences. The focus on advocacy (in Chapter 6) sought to clarify, provoke and inspire productive deliberations on how one might navigate these fears and challenges associated with advocacy at the science-policy interface and in the public arena.

The book profiled work from scholars like Shahzeen Attari, Naomi Oreskes, John Kotcher, Elke Weber, John Besley, Declan Fahy, Matt Nisbet, and Lydia Messling, who are conducting research to more systematically understand intersections of expertise, public intellectualism

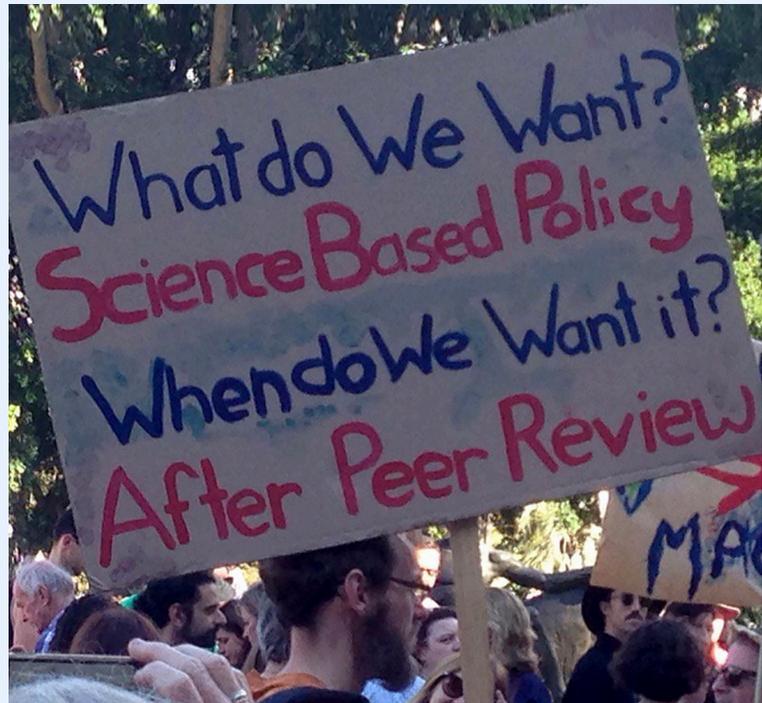


Figure 1. A sample of a Science March protest sign. Photo credit: anonymous.

and advocacy. For instance, Shahzeen Attari and colleagues who examined personal choices by use of public transportation (not intentions to fly or home energy conservation) and found that “differences in perceived credibility strongly affect participants’ reported intentions to change personal energy consumption” (2016, 325). In the book, I also drew on research that I have undertaken with David Oonk (2018). Together, these scholars and their research provide important insights into academic climate advocacy in 2020 and beyond.

The focus on advocacy sought to clarify, provoke and inspire productive deliberations on how one might navigate these fears and challenges associated with advocacy at the science-policy interface and in the public arena.

Again, it is understandable if academic researchers do not desire to be type I advocates. However, as academic researchers it is vitally important that we do not lose the term advocacy altogether. In this 21st century milieu of ‘post-truth’ and ‘fake news’, when we in the academic arena (as well as in others) surrender advocacy altogether, we surrender advocacy for facts, advocacy for truth, and advocacy for evidence as well.

There are consequential and often deleterious impacts when relevant experts do not step up. Unfortunately, this predicament around perceptions of academic advocacy has emerged at a time when involvement is sorely needed.

In February 2018, the Editors of Scientific American penned an opinion piece entitled ‘Go Public or Perish’. In it, they made the observation that “if citizens never hear from legitimate experts, no one can blame them for indifference to fake-science tweets, decisions by politicians that ignore facts, or cuts to federal agencies that are supposed to be built on sound science” (2018).

4. CONCLUSION (TO AN ONGOING STORY)

As climate change cuts to the heart of how we live, work, play and relax in modern life, engagement through research and through communications entail reflection on how our personal lives mesh with our professional ones. ‘Advocacy’ is in fact humanizing, and setting (positive) examples do matter. And members of academic communities have engaged various forms of engagement relating to their research every day. Some engage in advocacy in part because they view engagement as part of their responsibility as contemporary climate researchers. Others have engaged because they seek to shift and/or elevate the quality of public conversations.

Exemplification theory suggests that concrete cases of influential actors grappling with issues like climate change can significantly influence citizens’ awareness and inclination to act themselves (Gibson and Zillman, 1994). This is the case because such exertions have been found to lower the psychological barriers to engagement (Zillman, 2006). Pro-environmental and pro-social behavioral engagement through inspirational leadership has been evidenced

in numerous studies (e.g. Maki et al 2019; Lin, 2013).

Since I wrote the book, another research contribution from Gregg Sparkman and Shahzeen Attari gives the imperfect ones among us some encouragement too. Detecting possible 'greener than thou' blowback (in other words getting some resistance by acting too perfect or extreme), they found that "advocates, especially experts, are most credible and influential when they adopt many sustainable behaviors in their day-to-day lives, so long as they are not seen as too extreme" (Sparkman and Attari, 2020, p. 6).

Today, we are forced to navigate these challenges in choppy waters of climate discourse in the public sphere (Figure 2). There is no particularly 'easy sailing' here. However, informed choices (based on social sciences and humanities scholarship and examples in practice that I profile here and in my book), a more clear understanding along with mindful partnerships and collaborations can overcome many of these vulnerabilities and concerns.

When those recoiling from spaces of advocacy for evidence-based climate research are the relevant

experts who hold insights for useful and informed commentary, I ultimately argue that they should be viewed as missed opportunities to attend to their present-day responsibilities of meeting people where they are on climate change. Put simply, we must instead normalize, celebrate and protect advocacy for evidence, truth and facts in our shared 21st century encounters at the human-environment interface.

In this 21st century milieu of 'post-truth' and 'fake news', when we in the academic arena (as well as in others) surrender advocacy altogether, we surrender advocacy for facts, advocacy for truth, and advocacy for evidence as well.

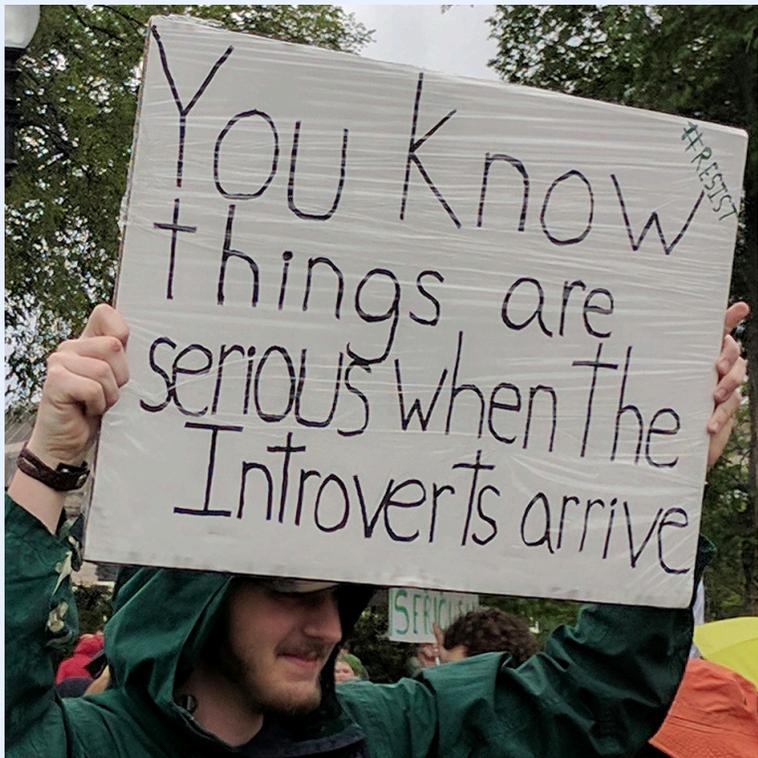


Figure 2. A sample of a Science March protest sign. Photo credit: Sarah K. Miller.

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