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## Science, Politics and Press Releases

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The Bush administration has faced constant criticism for its overbearing management of information. Some of the latest allegations involve scientists from two federal agencies who claim that they have been muzzled.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), well known for its public relations prowess, embarrassed itself with the ham-handed efforts of a political appointee to deny media access to James Hansen, one of its most prominent scientists. NASA's woes multiplied when it was revealed that the media gatekeeper was a 24-year-old former Bush campaign worker who had "accidentally" claimed earning a college degree when he had not.

And when the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration issued a press release asserting an official agency position on hurricanes and global warming, this assertion simply was not true.

NASA fired its political appointee and instituted a review of its media policies. NOAA revised its press release and its administrator, Conrad C. Lautenbacher Jr., encouraged all NOAA scientists "to speak freely and openly."

But the allegations that have followed these two incidents reflect fundamental misunderstandings about the relationship of science and politics. For instance, some scientists in NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory complained that NASA headquarters preferred to use the phrase "climate change" rather than "global warming" in press releases.

But the choice of language to use in a press release reflects political as well as scientific considerations. It is true that a Republican strategy memorandum recommended the phrase "climate change." Environmental advocacy groups have long preferred the phrase "global warming." Science alone cannot say which phrase to use, and consequently the choice between them necessarily involves political considerations.

NOAA and NASA produce hundreds of scientific papers each year, and only a very small fraction are accompanied by an official press release. Thus the decision even to issue a press release necessarily involves non-scientific considerations such as casting the agency in a positive light, newsworthiness, and sometimes, partisan politics.

That the political leadership of federal agencies manages information in pursuit of their interests is not new or surprising. President Nixon went so far as to shuffle the timing of Apollo moon launches, against NASA wishes, to shield his 1972 re-election campaign from the potential of a failed mission's political fallout.

Some seek to depoliticize science communications in the Holy Grail of identifying a bright line between science and politics. David Goldston, chief of staff to Representative Sherwood Boehlert, chairman of the House Science Committee, said, "The issue is where does science end and policy begin."

But if the choice of words in a press release and the decision to issue a press release about science are inherently political, then there simply is no such line.

A better approach was suggested by NASA Administrator Michael Griffin, who suggested distinguishing professional duties from personal opinions. "As long as people speak as private citizens, my attitude is, let me hold your coat for you. You can get into that fray and get beat up. You just can't label it as an agency position."

In the 21st century scientists have options for communicating to the world that rival the reach of official press releases. For instance, scientists can easily set up a weblog from their home computers and on their own time expound on any topic. A good example is [RealClimate.org](http://RealClimate.org), an influential weblog whose authors have not held back on topics like the Kyoto Protocol, intelligent design and the Bush administration. One of the proprietors of RealClimate is a colleague of James Hansen at NASA.

But distinguishing professional duties from personal opinions can also present a challenge, especially for senior career officials. As the official NOAA media policy states, "Whether in person, on camera, or over the phone, when speaking to a reporter you represent and speak for the entire agency."

Democracy would be impossible if every government employee sought to interpret or implement laws and policy according to their own personal preferences. Government employment carries with it professional responsibilities, which are proportionately greater the higher ranking the career official.

J. Patrick Dobel, a professor in the Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, writes, "All senior leaders, whether appointed or career, serve in an administration and for a principle with broader responsibilities. ... They have strong implicit obligations to stay within the policy framework of their administration and not undermine their principal."

Of course, government scientists who disagree with the policies of their employers always have the option of resigning, if they feel that they can no longer do their jobs, or they can stay, do their jobs, and seek effective reform from the inside. What they should not do, however, is pretend that in the purity of science there lies a solution to the realities of politics. Claims to the contrary ultimately will lead to further unhealthy politicization of the scientific enterprise.

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