Manufactured Controversy
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Manufactured Controversy: when significant dispute does not exists *inside* the scientific community, but is successfully created by special interests for a public audience, often by insinuating uncertainty about widely accepted data or theories and arguing that legitimate dispute about it is being suppressed within the scientific community. This works especially well in a culture that identifies itself as a democracy because it invokes values that are shared by the scientific community and the public alike, like free speech, academic freedom, and the revolutionary force of new ideas against a repressive orthodoxy.

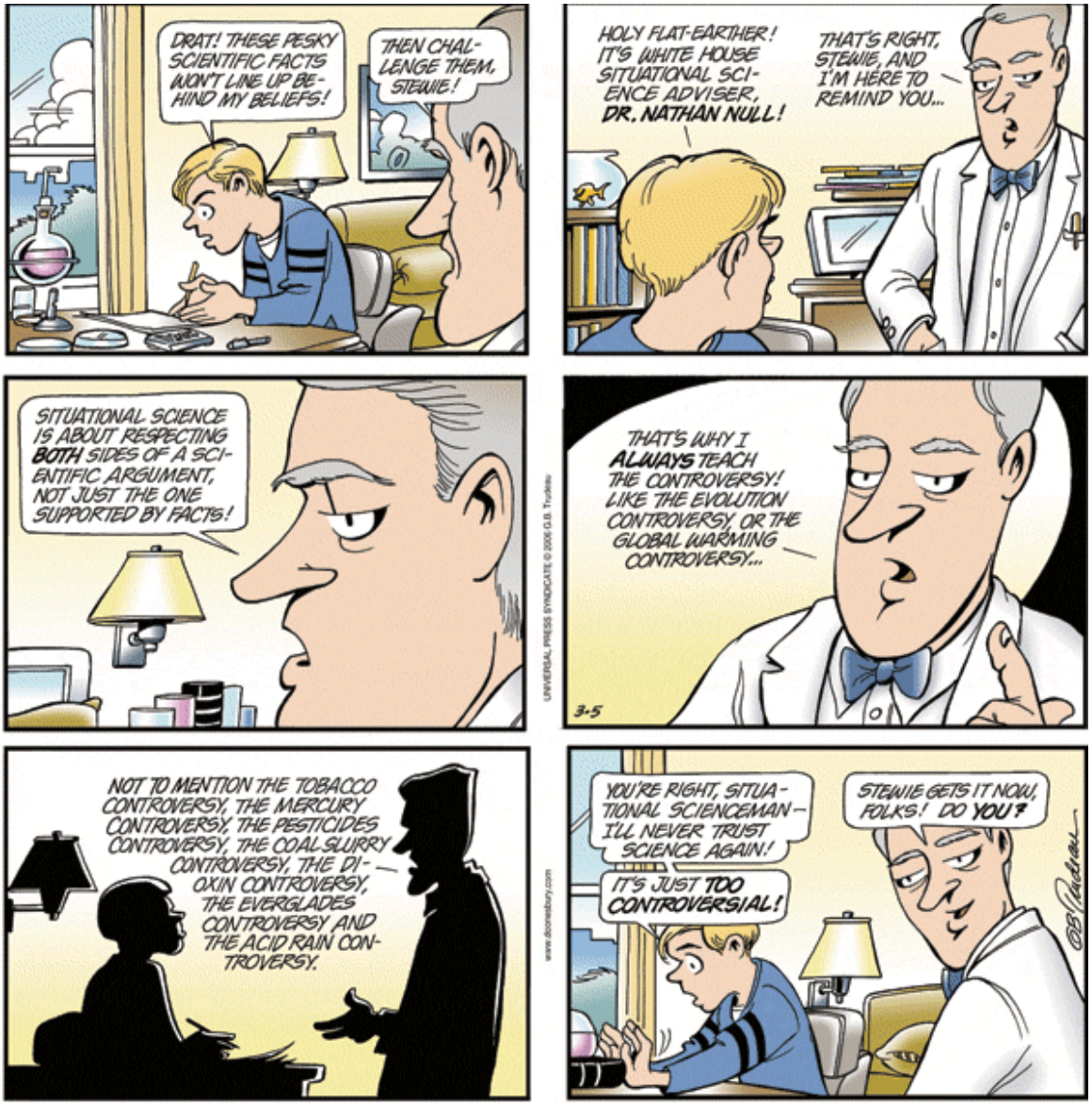
Purposes: manufactured controversy can be used to maintain the status quo or to change it. Controversy can be manufactured to delay the adoption of public policy that is warranted by current scientific findings, as in the tobacco industry's challenge of the link between cigarettes and cancer, or ExxonMobil's claim that global warming is "unsettled science." Alternatively, the promotion of controversy can warrant policy change, as in South African President Thabo Mbeki's use of AIDS dissent to justify his decision to prohibit government hospitals from supplying ARV drugs to the HIV infected poor, or the Discovery Institute's argument that public schools should "teach the controversy" by pointing out the "strengths and weaknesses" of evolutionary theory.

Smoking Guns: Consider the following from Frank Luntz's 2002 memo on the Environment: "*The scientific debate remains open.* Voters believe that there is *no consensus* about global warming within the scientific community. Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, *you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate*" (137). "*The scientific debate is closing [against us] but not yet closed. There is still a window of opportunity to challenge the science.*…" (138). Or consider the Brown & Williamson's 1969 memo on Smoking and Health: "Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of facts' that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing controversy" (4).

Recent Cases: The Louisiana Science Education Act was passed by that state's legislature and signed into law by Governor Bobby Jindal this summer; it orders public schools in Louisiana to "promote critical thinking skills, logical analysis, and open and objective discussion of scientific theories being studied including, but not limited to, evolution, the origins of life, global warming, and human cloning." In the context of recent documentaries like *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* or *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, which charge the scientific community with unfairly suppressing scientists who question the orthodoxy (on evolution and on the existence of anthropogenic climate change, respectively), legislation like the Louisiana Science Education Act is presented as a necessary protection for the voice of the minority in a democracy.

Response of the Scientist: Scientists are in a bind when they engage the public argument *and* when they refuse to engage it. When scientists question the credibility of those who manufacture controversy and insist that there *is* no significant scientific controversy behind these theories, they confirm the fears of a public that distrusts their increasingly specialized expertise and suspects a peer-regulated scientific community of silencing outsiders. When scientists remain silent, on the grounds that entering into debate will only give credibility to fringe voices, they come off as elitist and dogmatic, again feeding the arguments of those who manufacture controversy. So what should scientists do when they think a scientific controversy is being manufactured for a public audience?

Role of the Science Studies Scholar: Steve Fuller embraces the revolutionary role of those critiquing science in the public sphere; he sees his own support for intelligent design as an investment in a scientific revolution that needs shielding from hasty dismissal by a dogmatic scientific hegemony. In contrast, Bruno Latour fears that academic critique of science that once thrived by pointing out the uncertainty of scientific truth claims will "run out of steam" in a world where attacks on scientific certainty are used by political actors to mislead the public. So how can a science studies scholar determine when a specific scientific "controversy" needs to be exposed as a manufactured political tactic, and when it should be identified as a suppressed argument that deserves attention despite the force of institutional, economic, or ideological interests that govern mainstream science? Should we get involved in such "controversies," and if so, how? Demarcation (what *is* science?), discursive practice (how do debate and consensus work in science?), and credibility (who should be believed and why?) are all issues in these debates, and they draw on various theories in the philosophy, history, and sociology of science; how is this scholarship best deployed?



Additional Readings

William R. Freudenburg, Robert Gramling, and Debra J. Davidson, "Scientific Certainty Argumentation Methods (SCAMs): Science and the Politics of Doubt," *Sociological Inquiry* 78.1 (February 2008): 2-38.

Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004): 225-48.

David Michaels, *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

Matthew C. Nisbet and Chris Mooney, "Framing Science," *Science* 316 (6 April 2007): 56.

Naomi Oreskes, "Science and Public Policy: What's Proof Got To Do With It?" *Environmental Science & Policy* 7 (2004): 369-83.

Naomi Oreskes, Erik M. Conway, and Matthey Shindell, "From Chicken Little to Dr. Pangloss: William Nierenberg, Global Warming, and the Social Deconstruction of Scientific Knowledge," *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 38.1 (2008): 109-52.

Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds. *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

S. Holly Stocking and Lisa W. Holstein, "Manufacturing Doubt: Journalists' Roles in the Construction of Ignorance in a Scientific Controversy," *Public Understanding of Science*, in press. [Public Understanding of Science OnlineFirst, published on September 16, 2008 as doi:10.1177/0963662507079373]

Union of Concerned Scientists, *Smoke, Mirrors & Hot Air: How ExxonMobil Uses Big Tobacco's Tactics to Manufacture Uncertainty on Climate Science* (January 2007). http://www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/global_warming/exxon_report.pdf