



Canada must free scientists to talk to journalists

Strict controls on what federal researchers can reveal about their work is a disservice to science and the public, says Kathryn O'Hara.

This week is Right to Know Week in Canada, intended to acknowledge and celebrate our freedom-of-information laws. Some 40 other countries have a Right to Know Day, but we Canadians get a whole week. And you know what? We need it.

Ironically, this celebration of open information comes on the back of new evidence of unacceptable political interference in the public statements of federal government researchers. In short, the information policies of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper are muzzling scientists in their dealings with the media.

What happened to the transparency and accountability promised when the government formed the first of two minority administrations in 2006? Its stated communication policy, posted on a federal website, directed civil servants to "Provide the public with timely, accurate, clear, objective and complete information about its policies, programs, services and initiatives." Yet today, that openness is being held ransom to media messages that serve the government's political agenda.

The signs were there in spring last year, when press reports revealed that climate scientists in the government department Environment Canada were being stymied by Harper's compulsive message control. Our researchers were prevented from sharing their work at conferences, giving interviews to journalists, and even talking about research that had already been published. Carefully researched reports intended for the public — Climate Change and Health, from Health Canada, and Climate Change Impacts, from Natural Resources Canada — were released without publicity, late on Friday afternoons, and appeared on government websites only after long delays. This is not a government that is comfortable with climate change or the implications for action, as its largely obstructionist stance at climate talks has shown.

But it is not just climate-change research that is being targeted. Margaret Munro, a science reporter for PostmediaNews, has uncovered that a policy enacted in March stipulates that all federal scientists must get pre-approval from their minister's office before speaking to journalists who represent national or international media. The pre-approval process requires time-consuming drafting of questions and answers, scrutinized by as many as seven people, before a scientist can be given the go-ahead by the minister's staff. This is to spare the minister 'any surprises.' What kind of politician needs that sort of pampering? And what kind of journalist submits questions for a scientist to a ministerial clearing house? This message manipulation shows a disregard for the values and virtues of both journalism and science, and subverts timely disclosure and access to scientific data.

All governments try to control their political message and push for policies that reflect party

philosophy, but these new restrictions also seek to control the scientific message in research with no link to partisan politics. When Scott Dallimore, a geoscientist for Natural Resources Canada in Sidney, British Columbia, reported evidence of the colossal flood that occurred in northern Canada at the end of the last ice age (*Nature* 464, 740–743; 2010), he was put through the message-moulding machine. As a result, Canada's taxpayers, who funded the research, were left in the dark. While the news broke elsewhere, journalists in Canada who had previously had open access to Dallimore, a gifted communicator, were left spinning their wheels while deadlines passed. The flood happened 13,000 years ago, so how can this work be construed as politically sensitive?

Scientists in departments that deal with natural resources, health, fisheries and oceans have also felt the pinch of the muzzle. Consequently, Canadians learn little about the results of their wider government science, at least first-hand. Media clearance can take four or five days — ridiculous in a 24/7 news world. And because of the delays, research led by Canadian scientists is regularly channelled through international collaborators and released through their agencies.

The situation is more bizarre still, given a 2007 pledge from the government to get Canadians excited about science. Forget excitement, it's hard to even maintain public trust in taxpayer-funded research when scientists are not allowed to explain their work. Government media officers also find it difficult to craft informative press releases and bring research to media attention. Journalists tend not to buy media lines, and a savvy public can smell a partisan puff piece. No wonder, then, that the relationship between government press officers and media outlets has grown strained.

So, how might we set out to re-establish a respectful, workable relationship? The Canadian Science Writers' Association in Toronto is asking for timely access to federal scientists whose research is published in journals or presented at conferences open to the media. Our journalists need to speak with scientists to avoid misinterpretation of research. And, as journalists around the world will testify, scientists usually avoid politics and steer clear of policy-sensitive discussions. Canada's researchers are no different.

There is nothing new here. Rather, there is a need to return to a procedure that served us well in the past. It means working without cumbersome and propagandistic media lines, and trusting that scientists, journalists and press officers know what they are doing, are good at their respective jobs and will not work from a script that restricts the spirit of enquiry or accountability. Access to scientific evidence that informs policy is not a luxury. It is an essential part of our right to know. ■

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MESSAGE
MANIPULATION
SHOWS A
DISREGARD FOR
JOURNALISM AND
SCIENCE

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