Parallel Session 23: What are we talking about when saying “public dialogue”

HOW PUBLIC OPINION COULD BE MANIPULATED THROUGH SCIENCE ON BIG ECOLOGICAL DISASTERS

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Abstract

This study wants to prove how politicians surround themselves with adjacent scientists in order to endorse their explanations under a certain scientific point of view, in many cases hard to believe, when they try to explain some decisions politically and socially unacceptable. In order to explain it, we have chosen two ecological disasters: the toxic waste in natural reserve of Doñana, the most important one in southern Europe (April 1998) and the Prestige’s catastrophe (November 2002) the oil waste spilt over Spanish northeast coast.

Key words: scientific journalism, Doñana, science manipulated

Context

Usually big ecological disasters make people increase a reasonable social alarm as well as the political system tends toward to be criticised for a lack of conscience in environment affairs. Politicians barely have credibility. However, science still maintains a bit of objectivity that makes people respect any kind of decision if it has ensures by scientific point of view. It has been consulted six Spanish newspapers (El País, El Mundo, ABC, Diario 16, El Periódico de Cataluña and La Vanguardia) to know how they kept on informing four months later of disasters. After a qualitative analysis of sources used by them, it has been noticed that the one they used the most was The Superior Board of Investigation Scientist (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas CSIC), a political organisation created by Spanish dictator Francisco Franco that, according to opening speech in 1940, it pointed to exposure scientist knowledge to political will. At present times, the chairman of CSIC is still chosen by the government. Quantity investigations carried out in six months from February to July 1998 show us that the 48, 1% of 1.458 scientist news in those newspapers named to CSIC when it only produces 16% of total scientist news. It shows how media ignore Spanish universities when it proves they produce 77% of scientist discoveries. Free down of teaching at Spanish universities is a fact since the monarchy returned in 1975; therefore, its final researches are not under political pressures. Nevertheless, the government keep control of some state research organisations. Things like that happen also in others democratic countries. Last Robert Kennedy’s book, Crimes against nature (2004), show us how in a country like
United States, the oldest democracy in the world, political handling on environment issues grows every day.

An example of this policy is the appointment by President George Bush of John Graham as a Administrator of Office of Management and Budget office. As Kennedy said in his book, “Graham received huge amounts of money from the most polluting people on business like Dow Chemical, Du Pont, Mosanto, Exxon or General Motors, everything before his arrival to Bush administration”.

Also, Bush take on journalist Frank Luntz in order to disguise rhetorically attacks against environment. He carried out two projects: “clean skies” and “healthy forest”; the first one allowed to coal industry to keep polluting; the second one made possible to cut down indiscriminately thousands of trees from natural reserves.

In addition, Luntz was the one responsible for a big campaign of intimidation against some scientists who were not agree with Bush’s administration. It is worth to emphasize James Zhan’s case; he was forced to leave his job as a microbiologist at US Agriculture Department and to “bury” his studies on antibiotics effects in meat industry.

In addition, scientific Robert Watson, former Director of Science Division at NASA, had to resign pressed by some American energy lobbies for proving with scientific facts the global warming theory.

Kennedy’s book finally alerts against many pseudoscientific who works just for money for multinational companies trying to twist science world. “We are getting back to clouds times” he ended.

Results

As it can be seen, the parallelism between Spanish dictatorship is obvious. In 1940, former dictator Francisco Franco expelled from Spain to many independent republicans Scientists after the civil war. A few months later, Jose Ibañez was appointed Secretary of State for Education and, at the same time, first president at CSIC; he made a speech that even today looks like a flagstone in Spanish science: “We should forget and despise those who deify human knowledge. From my position, I remind to intellectuals their duties with the science. Silly happy times when science was a free and voluntary are over”.

Back to present times, this study reveals that during Doñana’s affairs, our particularly Spanish Frank Luntz was Javier Fernandez Carvajal, CSIC’s editor in chief, and Spaniard copy of John Graham was Cesar Nombela, president of CSIC appointed by former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar.

From April to May we analyzed 454 pieces of news and it found out that 246 (which mean 53%) pointed at CSIC as a primary source. However, from April 26 to June 30, the busiest news time, 407 pieces of news were published and exactly 224 (55%) mentioned CSIC; in this last period Nombela was named in 74 times. Scientists from universities or independent academies barely were mentioned by mass media.
CSIC massive influence over press during Doñana’s affairs was so intensive that even some universities complained about it to media.

In the Prestige’s affairs (November, 2002) happened the same politics manipulations through science. But in this case the government considered Rolf Tarrach, president in 2002 of CSIC, as a person who couldn’t be trusted and replaced with Emilio Lora-Tamayo, considered a scientist closer to the Spanish government and son of one Franco Minister who closed five universities and used police repression against students and teachers who asked for free down.

**Conclusion**

Politicians intend to control some scientists who are open to interact as journalistic sources. These selection methods remind dictatorship times. This study shows up that, in case of big catastrophes, journalists choose these types of politicized scientist sources instead independent scientists of universities or academies.