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Tell people something they know already and they will thank you for it.
Tell them something new and they will hate you for it.

Walled In

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Science and humanities students view each other with incomprehension: blame our dumb, narrow schooling.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 6th April 2010

The MPs were kind to Professor Phil Jones. During its hearings, the Commons Science and Technology Committee didn't even ask the man at the centre of the hacked climate emails crisis about the central charge he faces: that he urged other scientists to delete material subject to a freedom of information request(1). Last week the committee published its report, and blamed his university for the "culture of non-disclosure" over which Jones presided(2).

Perhaps the MPs were swayed by the disastrous performance of his boss at the hearings. Edward Acton, vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia, came across as flamboyant, slippery and insincere(3). Jones, on the other hand, seemed both deathly dull and painfully honest. How could this decent, nerdy man have messed up so badly?

None of it made sense: the intolerant dismissal of requests for information, the utter failure to engage when the hacked emails were made public, the refusal by other scientists to accept that anything was wrong. Then I read an article by the computer scientist Steve Easterbrook and for the first time the light began to dawn(4).

Easterbrook, seeking to defend Jones and his colleagues, describes a closed culture in which the rest of the world is a tedious and incomprehensible distraction. "Scientists normally only interact with other scientists. We live rather sheltered lives ... to a scientist, anyone stupid enough to try to get scientific data through repeated FOI requests quite clearly deserves our utter contempt. Jones was merely expressing (in private) a sentiment that most scientists would share – and extreme frustration with people who clearly don't get it."

When I read that, I was struck by the gulf between our worlds. To those of us who clamoured for freedom of information laws in the UK, FoI requests are almost sacred. The passing of these laws was a rare democratic victory; they're among the few means we possess of ensuring that politicians and public servants are answerable to the public. What scientists might regard as trivial and annoying, journalists and democracy campaigners see as central and irreducible. We speak in different tongues and inhabit different worlds.

I know how it happens. Like most people with a science degree, I left university with a store of recondite knowledge that I could share with almost no one. Ill-equipped to understand any subject but my own, I felt cut off from the rest of the planet. The temptation to retreat into a safe place was almost irresistible. Only the extreme specialisation demanded by a PhD, which would have walled me in like an anchorite, dissuaded me.

I hated this isolation. I had a passionate interest in literature, history, foreign languages and the arts, but at the age of 15 I'd been forced, like all students, to decide whether to study science or humanities. From that point we divided into two cultures, and the process made idiots of us all. Perhaps eventually we'll split into two species. Reproducing only with each other, scientists will soon become so genetically isolated that they'll no longer be able to breed with other humans.

We all detest closed worlds: the Vatican and its dismissal of the paedophilia scandals as "idle chatter"(5); the Palace of Westminster, whose members couldn't understand the public outrage about their expenses, the police forces which refuse to discipline their errant officers(6). Most of us would endorse George Bernard Shaw's opinion that all professions are conspiracies against the laity. Much of the public hostility to science arises from the perception that it's owned by a race to which we don't belong.

But science happens to be the closed world with one of the most effective forms of self-regulation: the peer-review process. It is also intensely competitive, and the competition consists of seeking to knock each other down. The greatest scientific triumph is to falsify a dominant theory. It happens very rarely, as only those theories which have withstood constant battery still stand. If anyone succeeded in overturning the canon of climate science, they would soon become as celebrated as Newton or Einstein. There are no rewards for agreeing with your colleagues, tremendous incentives to prove them wrong. These are the last circumstances in which a genuine conspiracy could be hatched.

But it is no longer sufficient for scientists to speak only to each other. Painful and disorienting as it is, they must engage with that irritating distraction called the rest of the world. Everyone owes something to the laity, and science would die were it not for the billions we spend on it. Scientists need make no intellectual concessions, but they have a duty to understand the context in which they operate. It is no longer acceptable for climate researchers to wall themselves off and leave the defence of their profession to other people.

There are signs that this is changing. The prominent climate change scientist Simon Lewis has just sent a long submission to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) about misrepresentation in the Sunday Times(7). The paper claimed that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's contention that global warming could destroy up to 40% of the Amazon rainforest "was based on an unsubstantiated claim by green campaigners who had little scientific expertise."(8) It quoted Lewis to suggest that he supported the story. The article and its claims were reproduced all over the world.

But the claims were wrong: there is solid scientific research showing that damage on this scale is plausible in the Amazon(9,10). Lewis claims that the Sunday Times falsely represented his views. He left a comment on the website but it was deleted. He sent a letter to the paper but it wasn't published. Only after he submitted his complaint to the PCC did the Sunday Times respond to him. The paper left a message on his answerphone, which he has made public: "it's been recognised that the story was flawed."(11) After seven weeks of stonewalling him, the Sunday Times offered to run his letter. But it has neither taken down the flawed article nor published a correction.

Good luck to Simon Lewis, but as the Press Complaints Commission's treatment of the News of the World phone hacking scandal suggests, he's likely to find himself shut out of another closed world - journalism - in which self-regulation manifestly doesn't work(12). Here's a profession which looks like a conspiracy against the laity, even from the inside.

The incomprehension with which science and humanities students regard each other is a tragedy of lost opportunities. Early specialisation might allow us to compete in the ever more specialised labour market,

but it equips us for nothing else. As Professor Don Nutbeam, vice-chancellor of Southampton University complains, “young people learn more and more about less and less.”(13)

We are deprived by our stupid schooling system of most of the wonders of the world, of the skills and knowledge required to navigate it, above all of the ability to understand each other. Our narrow, antiquated education is forcing us apart like the characters in a Francis Bacon painting, each locked in our boxes, unable to communicate.

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