

It should be criminal to fund climate change denial

The importance of clearly communicating science to the public should not be underestimated. Accurately understanding our natural environment and sharing that information can be a matter of life or death. When it comes to global warming, much of the public remains in denial about a set of facts that the [majority of scientists clearly agree on](#). With such high stakes, an organized campaign funding misinformation ought to be considered criminally negligent.

The earthquake that rocked L'Aquila Italy in 2009 provides an interesting case study of botched communication. This natural disaster left more than 300 people dead and nearly 66,000 people homeless. In a strange turn of events six Italian scientists and a local defence minister were subsequently sentenced to six years in prison.

The ruling is popularly thought to have convicted scientists for failing to predict an earthquake. On the contrary, as risk assessment expert [David Ropeik pointed out](#), the trial was actually about the failure of scientists to clearly communicate risks to the public. The convicted parties were accused of providing “inexact, incomplete and contradictory information.” As one citizen stated:

We all know that the earthquake could not be predicted, and that evacuation was not an option. All we wanted was clearer information on risks in order to make our choices.

Crucially, the scientists, when consulted about ongoing tremors in the region, did not conclude that a devastating earthquake was impossible in L'Aquila. But, when the [Defence Minister held a press conference](#) saying there was no danger, they made no attempt to correct him. I don't believe poor scientific communication should be criminalized because doing so will likely discourage scientists from engaging with the public at all.

But the [tragedy in L'Aquila reminds us](#) how important clear scientific

communication is and how much is at stake regarding the public's understanding of science. I have [argued elsewhere](#) that scientists have an ethical obligation to communicate their findings as clearly as possible to the public when such findings are relevant to public policy. Likewise, I believe that scientists have the corollary obligation to correct public misinformation as visibly and unequivocally as possible.

Many scientists recognize these civic and moral obligations. Climatologist Michael Mann is a good example; Mann has recently made the case for public engagement in a powerful New York Times opinion piece: “[If You See Something Say Something](#).”

Misinformation and criminal negligence

Still, critics of the case in L'Aquila are mistaken if they conclude that criminal negligence should never be linked to science misinformation. Consider cases in which science communication is intentionally undermined for political and financial gain. Imagine if in L'Aquila, scientists themselves had made every effort to communicate the risks of living in an earthquake zone. Imagine that they even advocated for a scientifically informed but costly earthquake readiness plan.

If those with a financial or political interest in inaction had funded an organized campaign to discredit the consensus findings of seismology, and for that reason no preparations were made, then many of us would agree that the financiers of the denialist campaign were criminally responsible for the consequences of that campaign. I submit that this is just what is happening with the current, [well documented funding of global warming denialism](#).

[More deaths can already be attributed to climate change](#) than the L'Aquila earthquake and we can be certain that deaths from climate change will continue to rise with global warming. Nonetheless, [climate denial remains a serious deterrent against](#) meaningful political action in the very countries most responsible for the crisis.

Climate denial funding

We have good reason to consider the funding of climate denial to be criminally and morally negligent. The charge of criminal and moral negligence ought to extend to all activities of the climate deniers who receive funding as part of a sustained campaign to undermine the public's understanding of scientific consensus.

[Criminal negligence](#) is normally understood to result from failures to avoid reasonably foreseeable harms, or the threat of harms to public safety, consequent of certain activities. Those funding climate denial campaigns can reasonably predict the public's diminished ability to respond to climate change as a result of their behaviour. Indeed, public uncertainty regarding climate science, and the resulting failure to respond to climate change, is the [intentional aim of politically and financially motivated denialists](#).

My argument probably raises an understandable, if misguided, concern regarding free speech. We must make the critical distinction between the protected voicing of one's unpopular beliefs, and the funding of a strategically organised campaign to undermine the public's ability to develop and voice informed opinions. Protecting the latter as a form of free speech stretches the definition of free speech to a degree that undermines the very concept.

What are we to make of those behind the well documented corporate funding of global warming denial? Those who purposefully strive to make sure "[inexact, incomplete and contradictory information](#)" is given to the public? I believe we understand them correctly when we know them to be not only corrupt and deceitful, but criminally negligent in their willful disregard for human life. It is time for modern societies to interpret and update their legal systems accordingly.

This post originally appeared at [The Conversation](#).

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