
These specialists are similar to courtroom expert witnesses, being properly credentialed, paid for their services and privileged to stand up for those with less expertise. This sort of side-taking makes sense in the courtroom. Unfortunately, this practice is increasingly becoming a disaster for public democracy because judgment calls involving science are becoming more common, and are being made by people with a declining ability to judge.

Consider the recently released results of the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment, which compares the ability in mathematics, science and reading by 15-year-olds in 65 countries or regions. The United States now ranks at or below average in all three fields, well below the rising economies in Asia and much of the industrialized world.

Many of us can look back to the previous half-century to tobacco, synthetic pesticides, acid rain, phosphate detergents, the Strategic Defense Initiative, stem-cell research and nuclear waste disposal. In every case, after much intellectual struggle, dozens of independent teams of scientists were able to reach consensus views that were broad and strong enough to precipitate national policy.

Yet in every case, professional deniers with conservative leanings were hired by industry to stall public acceptance of the consensus using doubt and obfuscation.

Now the main issue is climate change. And the professional deniers seem to have won the hearts and minds of the majority. Why? Some think it's the widening gap between the astonishing complexity of climate science relative to previous issues, and to the decline in public understanding. I think the main reason has to do with a change in the way information is shared and digested.

Walter Cronkite - the most beloved television anchor of my generation - signed off his nightly news broadcasts with: "And that's the way it is." His job - and that of competing network anchors - was to share the news of the day with a broad audience of citizens: wealthy, poor, white, black, conservative, liberal, native, immigrant, singles, families, polluters, environmentalists, soldiers and pacifists.

Our job was to take what he reported, process it for ourselves and take action. Of course network executives maintained editorial control. Nevertheless, most of the societal discussion took place after we got the news, and during real-time, in-person conversations.

Today, most of the discussion takes place before the news is electronically piped to individualized ideological silos. Through our personal choices of cable networks, news feeds, subscribed blogs, list-serves, e-alerts, and social networking sites, the majority of Americans can now create their own separate bubble universes of reality, into which they retreat for security, and from which they emerge to feed.

Like electronic woodchucks, we pop out of our digital burrows, avoid what we fear, ignore what doesn't interest us and feed only on what pleases us.
This works fine for hobbies and interests. But it cannot work for truly national issues because, on election days, individual voters pop out of their ideological silos with different versions of reality, rather than different spins on reality. I preferred a world in which we learned together and voted separately, than one in which we learn alone and vote together.

Lest you think I'm exaggerating, I suggest you review the alarming test results from the Program for International Student Assessment, read the alarming "Merchants of Doubt" and reflect on the dominance of professional deniers in shaping the 112th congressional agenda.

Please join me in giving the gift of anti-denial.