

## Cases for Teaching Responsible Communication of Science

# The opinionated scientist: Issues Brief

Note: The perspectives, arguments and opinions stated in this issue brief are those expressed in interviews with participants in the case itself.

### **What are potential benefits and drawbacks of scientists engaging with policy issues online?**

#### A. Benefits.

- It's important to write about science issues so that ordinary people understand how they might be impacted.
- Scientists calling out wrong decisions builds credibility in science.
- Ongoing engagement builds trust with audiences – it counters the fear and distrust that comes from unfamiliarity.
- Thoughtful engagement and discussion can help a researcher's reputation both inside and outside of academia.
- Blogs are a rapid form of communication – offering immediate information and interpretation to interested audiences.

#### B. Drawbacks.

- A researcher can be perceived as taking sides -- future partners who disagree might not want to collaborate.
- If someone is thought to be a whistleblower, it can be hard to get funding.
- Some science has become socially divisive where any criticism, even if well-intentioned, will be taken and possibly used out of context to support their agenda.
- You can rationalize and validate fear just talking about relevant issues, even if the message is meant to counter it.
- Criticism can harm the image of a unified scientific agreement – don't air our dirty laundry.

### **Should young scientists share their thoughts and critiques about specific policies online?**

#### A. No.

- Industry is full of advocacy – academic research should be removed from politics and provide an opinion-free voice.
- Researchers are often funded through the federal government -- no one likes to be criticized by someone on their own team.
- We as scientists need to protect ourselves from attack by uninformed publics. Fellow scientists shouldn't join in the attack.

- Most scientific communities are small where relationships are important. Don't burn bridges.
- If you really want to engage, just wait until after receiving tenure.

B. Yes.

- Ordinary people don't have the expertise to understand when a policy aligns with what science knows and when it doesn't. Scientists have a privileged perspective, which is important to add to the larger conversation.
- Everyone else is free to share their thoughts – why wouldn't you want the people with expertise to join the discussion?
- Science is public enterprise and often funded by taxpayers. We have an obligation to engage with to the public on these issues since they paid for it.
- Not engaging with policy gives too much power to the fringes to define the discussion
- University settings are not beholden to industry and provide a context where independent voices are free to interpret knowledge
- Science works better if we all work and talk together and not protect our rear
- If a field of science has become politically divisive, that is when discussion and critique is most important to resolve contention