

The Sad Demise of *On Line Opinion*

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In an email exchange with the editors of *On Line Opinion*, I have explained why I will not be contributing any further pieces to the site because it has been "captured" by climate change denialists. At the request of Graham Young I am putting my arguments into this last piece for *On Line Opinion*. At least, it will be my last unless and until the journal returns to the objectives it was set up to pursue.

My suspicions that *On Line Opinion* had been captured were prompted in May when chief editor Graham Young published a vigorous attack on Robyn Williams for one snide remark he made about climate change "sceptic" Don Aitkin. The vehemence of his attack was so disproportionate to the slight that I guessed that Young himself has become a climate change denialist and was infected with the sort of emotional fanaticism that causes climate change denialists to lose perspective.

These suspicions were confirmed by the publication on Monday June 30 of a piece by Tom Harris and John McLean titled "The UN climate change numbers hoax", of which more below. I then noticed *On Line Opinion* has been publishing a string of denialist articles and has been actively promoting the work of the Australian Environment Foundation, widely seen to be organisation set up by anti-environmentalists to confuse the public.

On Line Opinion claims it is just pursuing "balance" in the space it gives to climate change scepticism. But, as a number of journalists and authors have pointed out, "balance" means bias in the case of the climate change debate because by giving a "balance" of views *On Line Opinion* is communicating to its readers that there is a legitimate debate among scientists about the weight of scientific evidence on global warming. This is false and misleading.

The denialists have conspicuously failed to generate contrary evidence that can be published in refereed journals and instead devote themselves to creating doubt by exaggerating, exploiting and twisting the various uncertainties and unexplained phenomena that naturally characterise a body of science as complex and emergent as climate change science.

The so-called sceptics are not true scientific sceptics at all; they don't treat the arguments and evidence on each side sceptically but are fanatically anti-IPCC, dismissing all of its arguments.

I have explained this at more length in an article for *New Matilda* here <http://www.newmatilda.com/2008/05/19/death-rattles-climate-change-skeptics>.

There I also explain why I do not presume to engage in arguments about climate science because I do not have the expertise to do so without making a fool of myself. Denialists without any scientific qualifications, or irrelevant ones, show no such humility.

According to the line of argument about balance, it would be perfectly acceptable for *On Line Opinion* to carry a series of articles repudiating the link between AIDS and the HIV virus. (Try googling AIDS denialism.)

The AIDS denialists have to account for the fact that the overwhelming weight of medical and epidemiological evidence is against them, so they must invent fanciful theories about colonialist plots and gay capture of science to compensate for the lack of hard evidence to support their beliefs.

This is exactly what the climate change denialists do, and each time *On Line Opinion* runs one of their pieces it is, inter alia, endorsing their view that Australia's most eminent climate scientists are frauds and liars.

Would Graham Young argue that the interests of balance demand that *On Line Opinion* give space to the claims of creation science? Would it give space to the conspiracy theories about 9-11 being a CIA plot, or the Larouche delusions about the Royal Family being in cahoots with global Jewry to run drugs? Balanced, yes, but loopy and deceptive too.

The editors' appeal to the principles of good journalism to defend the publication of denialist anti-science, but have failed their readers by breaking another tenet of journalistic ethics. The lead author of "The UN climate change numbers hoax", Tom Harris, is described by *On Line Opinion* at the end of the article as "an Ottawa-based mechanical engineer and Executive Director of the International Climate Science Coalition".

What readers were not told is that Harris is a paid lobbyist for energy companies, that he has tried to change his Wikipedia entry to conceal the fact that he is or has been employed by the PR company High Park Group, and that at least one other website has pulled his articles because he is a paid political lobbyist.

None of this information is hard to find. See, for example here. <http://www.desmogblog.com/nrsp-controlled-by-energy-lobbyists>.

On Line Opinion readers are being misled by denying them this information, which would be mandatory in any newspaper opinion piece.

The editors of *On Line Opinion* cannot consistently appeal to one tenet of journalism (so-called balance) and ignore others (allowing the reader to know the relevant affiliations of its authors).

In short, *On Line Opinion* has been captured by propagandists. For some years, *On Line Opinion* fulfilled a very useful role in Australian political life. Sadly, it has decided to change. I for one will not be paying it any more attention.