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February 07, 2005

A Climate of Staged Angst

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Author: Hans Von Storch and Nico Stehr in Der Spiegel

The following essay by [Hans Von Storch](#) and [Nico Stehr](#) was originally published in Der Spiegel, a German newspaper, on 24 January 2005. We are providing an English translation with the permission of the authors and Der Spiegel.

The days are gone when climate researchers sat in their ivory towers packed to the rafters with supercomputers. Nowadays their field has become the stuff of thrillers, and they themselves have risen to take on the leading roles. The topic is so hotly contested, the prognoses so spectacular, that they are no longer merely the subject of media reports; now the specialists in staged apocalypse have moved in. Last year Roland Emmerich depicted a climatic collapse provoked by humankind in his film "The Day After Tomorrow." Since last week the belletristic counterpart has been available in German bookstores: the novel "State of Fear," by the best-selling author Michael Crichton.

The thriller is about the violent conflict between sober environmental realists and radical environmental idealists. For the idealists, the organized fear of abrupt climate change serves as a handy weapon. They interpret every somehow unusual weather event as proof of anthropogenic global warming. "You have to structure your information so that it's always confirmed, no matter what kind of weather we have," the P.R. consultant for the environmentalist organization advises. The realists, who protest that the evidence that human activity has increased meteorological extremes is thin, are fighting a losing battle. Their dry scientific arguments are unable to gain any ground against the colorful, horrific visions of the climate idealists.

Film and novel have certain aspects in common. Where Emmerich holds out the prospect of a threatening climate catastrophe, the book prophesies an economic collapse. In both cases, greenhouse gases produced by humankind are the culprit - in the film, because the emissions themselves are too much; in the book, because the fear of them is. The idealists are so obsessed with their mission that ultimately, in order to rouse the public, they themselves bring about the foretold catastrophes.

Despite a good deal of factually untrue - and thus all the more striking -

compression, Crichton has quite correctly observed the dynamic of the paths of communication among scientists, environmentalist organizations, the state and the civilian population. For there is indeed a serious problem for the natural sciences: namely, the public depiction and perception of climate change. Research has landed in a crisis because its public actors assert themselves on the saturated market of discussion by overselling the topic.

Climate change of man-made origin is an important subject. But is it truly the "most important problem on the planet," as an American senator claims? Are world peace, or the conquest of poverty, not similarly daunting challenges? And what about population growth, demographic change or quite normal natural disasters?

In the U.S., only a very few remain interested in the greenhouse effect. At the end of the 1980s, the situation was still different. That was the era of the great drought of 1988, the Mississippi flood of 1993, and the climate capers ought by rights to have taken off in earnest from that point. But that never happened in the U.S., and interest petered out. According to a survey by the CBS television network in May 2003, environmental problems were no longer ranked among the six most important subjects; and even within environmental problems, the topic of climate came in only in seventh place. In Germany, so far, things are still seen differently. But for how much longer?

In order to keep the topic of "climate catastrophe" - a concept nonexistent outside the German-speaking world, by the way - continually in the public eye, the media feel obligated, exactly like the protagonists in Crichton's thriller, to keep framing the topic "a bit more attractively." At the beginning of the 1990s - severe hurricanes had just swept through the country - one could read and hear in the German media that storms were due to become ever more severe. Since then, storms have become rarer in northern Europe. But no notice is taken of this. The fact that barometric fluctuations in Stockholm have shown no systematic change in the frequency and severity of storms since Napoleon's time is passed over in silence. Instead, there is now talk of heat waves and floods. Very much in the style of Crichton's instigators of fear, the story is now that all manner of extreme events are on the increase. Thus even drought in Brandenburg and deluge on the Oder fit the picture without apparent contradiction.

Add to this - besides normal floods and storms - other, more dramatically threatening, scenarios: the reversal of the Gulf Stream and the resultant cooling of large areas of Europe, for instance, or even the rapid melting of the Greenland ice pack. The question has already been publicly raised whether perhaps even the Asian tsunami can be attributed to the disastrous effects of human activity.

This will not be able to hold the public's attention for long. Soon people will have become accustomed to these warnings, and will return to the topics of the day: unemployment and Hartz IV, Turkey's entry to the E.U. or whether Borussia Dortmund can avert disaster on the soccer field and in the boardroom. Thus we will see firsthand how the prophets of doom will draw the climatic dangers in even more garish colours. The terrifying visions to haunt the future can already be guessed at: the breakup of the west Antarctic shelf ice, which will cause the water level to rise much more rapidly, and after a few decades of uncontrolled carbon dioxide emissions, an abrupt rise in

temperatures, giving us a deadly atmosphere like that of Venus. Prospects such as these have long been in the public eye; can they not compete effortlessly with Emmerich's Hollywood images?

The costs of stirring up fear are high. It sacrifices the otherwise so highly valued principle of sustainability. A scarce resource - public attention and trust in the reliability of science - is used up without being renewed by the practice of positive examples.

But what do climate researchers themselves think, how do they deal with the media and the population?

Public statements by noted German climate researchers give the impression that the scientific bases of the climate problem have essentially been solved. Thus science has provided the prerequisites for us now to react appropriately to the goal; meaning, in this case, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as much as possible.

This does not at all reflect the situation in the scientific community. A considerable number of climatologists are still by no means convinced that the fundamental questions have been adequately dealt with. Thus, in the last year a survey among climate researchers throughout the world found that a quarter of the respondents still harbor doubts about the human origin of the most recent climatic changes.

The majority of researchers are indeed of the opinion that global climate change caused by human activity is occurring, that it will accelerate in the future, and that it will thus become more readily apparent. This change will be accompanied by warmer temperatures and a higher water level. In the more distant future, that is, in about 100 years, a considerable increase of atmospheric greenhouse gases is foreseen, together with an increase in precipitation in our latitudes; in some regions there could be more powerful storms, in others weaker ones.

But again and again, there are scientists to whom, true to the alarmists' maxim in Crichton's book, this does not sound dramatic enough. Thus, more and more often they connect current extreme weather events with anthropogenic climate change. To be sure, this is usually carefully formulated; interviews sound something like this: "Is the flooding of the Elbe, the hurricane in Florida, this year's mild winter evidence for the climate catastrophe?" Answer: "That's scientifically unproven. But many people see it that way." Neither of these statements is false. In combination, however, they suggest the conclusion: Of course these weather events are evidence. Only no one dares to say this explicitly either.

The pattern is always the same: the significance of individual events is processed to suit the media and cleverly dramatized; when prognoses for the future are cited, among all the possible scenarios it is regularly the one with the highest rates of increase in greenhouse gas emissions - and thus with the most drastic climatic consequences - that is chosen; equally plausible variations with significantly lower emission increases go unmentioned.

Whom does this serve? It is assumed that fear can motivate listeners, but it is forgotten that it mobilizes them only in the short term. Climatic changes, however, demand long-term reactions. The effect on public opinion in the

short view may indeed be "better," and thus may also have a positive effect on reputation and research funding. But in order for this to function in the long run, each most recent claim about the future of the climate and of the planet must be ever more dramatic than the previous one. Once apocalyptic heat waves have been predicted, the climate-based extinction of animal species no longer attracts attention. Time to move on to the reversal of the Gulf Stream. Thus there arises a spiral of exaggeration. Each individual step may appear to be harmless; in total, however, the knowledge about climate, climate fluctuations, climate change and climatic effects that is transferred to the public becomes dramatically distorted.

Sadly, the mechanisms for correction within science itself have failed. Within the sciences, openly expressed doubts about the current evidence for climatic catastrophe are often seen as inconvenient, because they damage the "good cause," particularly since they could be "misused by skeptics." The incremental dramatization comes to be accepted, while any correction of the exaggeration is regarded as dangerous, because it is politically inopportune. Doubts are not made public; rather, people are led to believe in a solid edifice of knowledge that needs only to be completed at the outer edges.

The result of this self-censorship in scientists' minds is a deaf ear for new and surprising ideas that compete with or even contradict conventional patterns of explanation; science degenerates into being a repair shop for popular, politically opportune claims to knowledge. Thus it not only becomes sterile; it also loses its ability to advise the public objectively.

One example of this is the discussion of the so-called "hockey stick," a temperature curve that allegedly depicts the development over the last 1000 years, and whose shape resembles that of a hockey stick. In 2001 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the committee of climate researchers appointed by UNO, rashly institutionalized this curve as the iconic symbol for anthropogenic climate change: At the end of a centuries-long period of stable temperatures, the upward-bent blade of the hockey stick represents the human influence.

In October 2004, we were able to demonstrate in the specialist journal "Science" that the methodological bases that led to this hockey-stick curve are mistaken. We wanted to reverse the spiral of exaggeration somewhat, without also relativizing the central message - that climate change caused by human activity does indeed exist. Prominent representatives of climate research, however, did not respond by taking issue with the facts. Instead, they worried that the noble cause of protecting the climate might have been done harm.

Other scientists lapse into a zeal reminiscent of nothing so much as the McCarthy era. For them, methodological criticism is the spawn of "conservative think tanks and propagandists for the oil and coal lobby," which they believe they must expose; dramatizing climate change, on the other hand, is defended as a sensible means of educating society.

What is true for other sciences should also hold for climate research: Dissent is the motor of further development, Differences of opinion are not an unpleasant family affair. The concealment of dissent and uncertainty in favor of a politically good cause takes its toll on credibility, for the public is more intelligent than is usually assumed. In the long term, these allegedly so helpful

dramatizations achieve the opposite of that which they wish to achieve.

By doing so, however, both science and society will have wasted an opportunity.

Hans von Storch, 55, heads the Coastal Research Institute of the GKSS Research Centre in Geesthacht and is considered one of the pioneers of computerized climate statistics. Together with Nico Stehr, 62, sociologist at the Zeppelin University in Friedrichshafen, he has conducted ongoing research into the public perception of climate change.

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hmmm von Storch commented in this very blog that there had been rather a muted response to his paper (

http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/prometheus/archives/climate_change/000219scientists_and_the_p.html

). I wonder what's changed since November 20th?

Posted by: [Tom Rees](#) at February 17, 2005 02:53 AM

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