

The Professional Ethics of Witnessing Professionals

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“**W**hat you have to say needs to be heard. . . . Are you willing to be a witness?”¹ Rafe Pomerance, director of Friends of the Earth, put the question to James Hansen, a prominent physicist turned climate scientist whose research on global warming pointed to the dangers of rising sea levels and other environmental changes with potential for catastrophic harm to the planet. Hansen had earlier concluded that carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would lead to warming sooner than previously predicted. As a scientist working at the Goddard Institute for Space Studies, he had tried to stay focused on his research and wrote mainly for his scientific colleagues. But then, recognizing that politicians, the public, and even many other scientists did not appreciate the seriousness of global warming, he accepted the challenge of the question that Pomerance put to him.² He became a witnessing professional. His testimony to Congress in 1988 dramatically put global warming on the public agenda. His subsequent advocacy furthered the cause, helping to make “the greenhouse effect” a familiar term in the public discourse.

Hansen’s witnessing was widely praised but not all of his efforts were welcomed. The government agency he worked for censored his remarks, and he ul-

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ognized that they owe more to society generally, not only to the particular individuals they serve. Even undertakers ought to show some consideration for the environment.

Professionals can engage in the climate debate just like any citizen. They can step out of their professional role and speak as a concerned member of the public. But the professional's obligation to witness is different from and stronger than the obligation that they may have as a citizen. Professionals have special expert knowledge, hold positions of potential influence, and enjoy the privileges granted by society to their profession. These three characteristics of professionals together create an obligation to contribute more to preventing social harms than is usually expected of an ordinary citizen.

The obligation does not extend to all social harms. Because professionals have other obligations— notably to their clients, patients, colleagues, and students— their time for satisfying the demands of the service to the public is limited. It is a scarce resource and should be deployed for compelling reasons. Climate change understood as an existential threat surely qualifies as such a reason.

The strength of the obligation to bear witness varies in proportion to the knowledge and the influence the professional possesses. The more the professional knows or should know, and the more potential influence the professional has, the greater the obligation. Also, the obligation is stronger to the extent that the threat is being ignored or neglected by leaders (such as politicians and corporate executives) who are in a position to bear witness but fail to do so. The obligation applies in the first instance to some climate scientists, who are the examples commonly used in discussing witnessing. But it sometimes applies even more to other professionals such as lawyers and judges. Judges, for example, do not have to become climate activists, but they should at least be willing to acknowledge the threat and accept the obligation to learn more about it. They should not act with indifference as Justice Antonin Scalia did when he was corrected for confusing the troposphere with the stratosphere. "Troposphere. Whatever. I told you before I'm not a scientist. . . . That's why I don't want to have to deal with global warming, to tell you the truth."⁷

Medical professionals are in a position to call attention to the effects of climate change on public health. Journalists, too, have a role. They have a responsibility to avoid false equivalence in their reporting on climate deniers and climate activists. Then there are the meteorologists on TV, who, though they are in a position to bear witness before wide audiences, have been among the professionals most reluctant to acknowledge the threat of climate change. Less than half of all U.S. broadcast meteorologists believe that human activity is the primary cause of climate change over the past fifty years, and only 12 percent or fewer are very comfortable with presenting information about global climate impacts, mitigation strategies, or future global climate projections.⁸

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phasize one side more than another in the debate—for example, the dangers of climate change more than the uncertainties about its extent. The challenge is to engage with this degree of advocacy, but to avoid bias that would distort professional knowledge. Witnessing professionals must maintain the distinction between emphasizing some facts rather than others (acceptable advocacy), and making sure that the facts that are emphasized are not reported inaccurately (in-apposite advocacy). Professionals need not tell the whole truth (as they would seek to do in scholarly writings), but they must affirm nothing but the truth. This distinction between the selection of facts and the presentation of facts is not always easy to maintain. Facts do not stand alone, but require interpretation, and may involve reference to other facts that the advocate might prefer to slight. Facts that bear on the strength of the claims one is making should not be omitted. The challenge of maintaining this distinction is illustrated by the controversy over a blog post by Roger Pielke, a prominent contributor to the climate debate who recommends that scientists assume the role of honest broker rather than act as an advocate.¹¹ As part of the inaugural edition of Nate Silver's *FiveThirtyEight* site, Pielke argued that weather disasters are not mainly caused by climate change. He presumably thought he was acting as an honest broker, providing balance to what he saw as the exaggerated claims of other scientists. Even if his factual claims were true—and critics challenged them¹²—his post was seen as supporting climate deniers. (Some critics question whether he has been an honest broker in other instances as well.)¹³ In any case, adopting the role of honest broker is not sufficient if the aim is to alert the public to the dangers of climate change. Witnessing professionals would do better to emphasize instead the long-term harms rather than getting involved in controversies about the causes of particular weather disasters.

If professionals are to be advocates, what should they be advocating for? The role is protean. Sometimes it implies advocacy simply for more research on climate change, as Robert Socolow proposes.¹⁴ This goal is worthwhile provided it is not used as an excuse to avoid undertaking more active measures. Sometimes the role includes a more controversial form of advocacy, recommending policies such as carbon caps or methods of geoengineering interventions or even nuclear power. The risk of bias becomes greater here, as the professional may find it harder to avoid becoming embroiled in partisan battles. (Also, the temptation is greater to make claims that go beyond one's professional competence, as I discuss below.)

If this kind of advocacy is thought to compromise professionals' standing as impartial authorities, they may choose a more general kind that stands a better chance of avoiding narrowly partisan politics. Environmental ethics scholar Dale Jamieson, for example, advocates for seven priorities, most of which could be accepted by a wide range of climate activists whatever their partisan affiliation.¹⁵ They include such general aims as integrating adaptation strategies with development plans, adopting and diffusing technologies that are already "on the shelf,"

and instituting full-cost energy accounting. Witnessing professionals addressing climate change cannot (and should not) completely avoid political controversy, but even when they advocate, they do not have to identify with a particular political party or special interest group.

One of the most appropriate approaches for the witnessing professional would be to adopt the role of Oreskes's sentinel. The professional would accept the responsibility of alerting the public, in no uncertain terms, to the impending disasters that climate change is bringing. This role does not abandon the commitment to facts, but presents them in a way to call attention to the threat. The sentinel

even informed policy analysts who can follow technical discussions and help translate the findings into language that journalists and commentators can follow. The journalists and commentators can then prepare messages that are more readily comprehensible. The process of communication is distorted if we think of the witness as a lone climate scientist who has to bear witness all on his or her own.

The risk remains that in this translation process, the science will be simplified excessively. It may be sensationalized in one direction or minimized in the other. The best protection against this risk is to be found in the reactions of scientists themselves. They are witness not only to climate change but also witnesses to how the information is conveyed to the general public. Even the scientist who is not adept at public communication may be in the position to call out distortions and simplifications as they reach the end of the communication chain. This kind of feedback loop already exists to some extent, but it should be explicitly recognized and further reinforced.

To support their claims in the public forum, witnessing professionals are inclined to appeal to the authority of professional opinion. This is perfectly legitimate since they speak not for themselves but for a body of knowledge that partly defines their profession. However, under pressure, some may be tempted to exaggerate the degree of consensus that exists in the profession. They may be inclined to downplay, for example, genuine differences that exist in the estimates of the rate at which global warming is occurring. The more controversial the professional opinion, the more professionals feel the need to enlist the support of fellow professionals, and the greater the temptation to overplay the degree of consensus. The risk is real, though there is no evidence that exaggeration is widespread among climate scientists themselves.

There may be a problem even when the consensus is strong. On climate change, nearly all experts agree that global warming is real, and most agree that humans are a principal cause. But when an activist asserts that 97 percent of climate scientists agree about the cause of global warming, some scientists may recoil.¹⁸ Socolow argues that overplaying consensus can mischaracterize the way science proceeds; it neglects the role of scientific dissent in challenging conventional e i (ur)-6.9ues thad2:3 l

only one audience. Claims of consensus (when well founded) are less likely to be counterproductive with journalists and the general public.

The witnessing professional has to find the balance between appealing to consensus and respecting the skeptical ethos of the scientific enterprise. In seeking that balance, the professional should clearly identify degrees of consensus, and differentiate issues on which there is agreement approaching consensus from those on which there is not. The professional should acknowledge that any consensus that might exist on broader questions of climate change breaks down as soon as the discussion turns to policy: what exactly should be done, and who should do it? But even when most climate scientists agree, professionals should not overplay the consensus card. They should make clear that “science . . . isn’t about voting” and that “every good scientist leaves room for doubt.”²⁰ An early influential paper documenting the scientific consensus on climate change proceeds in this spirit and strikes the balance that witnessing professionals should strive for.²¹

On some of the claims that the professional wishes to make, consensus is not to be found. There is no consensus on what counts as a “climate emergency,”²² but that should not stop the professional from arguing for the claim that we are facing a crisis of that magnitude. If consensus is treated as the only or main basis of professional authority, the scope for witnessing is drastically reduced. Professionals should be prepared to bear witness in a realm of plausibility, in which the standard is sufficient agreement rather than complete consensus.

Professionals can often be more effective if they work with officials in government and corporations. They need funds to support their research, and sometimes funds to publicize their findings. But if they get too close, they risk sacrificing their independence. They end up serving special interests rather than the public interest. The risk is well known in the case of funding from industry, though it is climate deniers who are more likely to receive such support.²³ But the motives of professionals have been questioned even when their support comes from the government. A Heritage Foundation critic remarked: “A lot of people are getting really, really rich off of the climate change industry. . . . The tidal wave of funding does reveal a powerful financial motive for scientists to conclude that the apocalypse is upon us.”²⁴

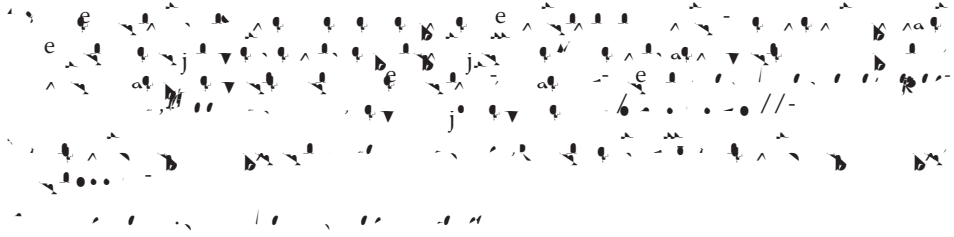
The witnessing professional may not be able to respond directly to this kind of cynicism about their motives. The best answer is to defend one’s conclusions on the merits in the public forum. But the ever-present doubts about motives underscore the need for rigorous conflict of interest policies. These are familiar enough in research funding, but that they are needed in witnessing is not so widely recognized. Like the research scientist, the witnessing professional should take steps to avoid conflicts of interest, or at least disclose conflicts if avoidance is not feasible. The aim is not so much to prevent professionals from shading their conclu-

sions to please their industry or government sponsors (which may happen) but to reduce the chances that they will appear to be influenced by their sponsors even when they are not. The purpose of conflict of interest policies is to maintain public confidence. The policies are intended to give the public, most of whom cannot personally know the professionals, some assurance that they are not being unduly influenced. Disclosure of funding sources, affiliations with interest groups, and professional background would be a worthwhile first step toward transparency.

Professionals are typically specialized and their expertise is limited to specific subjects. But climate change is a large subject, calling on the expertise of many different scientists, lawyers, and health professionals. When speaking out, professionals may be tempted to make pronouncements about matters beyond their area of expertise. Recall the criticism that James Hansen encountered when he ventured from his expertise on climate science to his advocacy of nuclear power.

When professionals are thrust into the public forum, they may feel that they are being evasive, even irresponsible, if they refuse to answer questions that are relevant and reasonable but go beyond their limited area of expertise. Naomi Oreskes describes what must be a common experience of climate scientists in dealing with the press.²⁵ As a geologist, she is knowledgeable about such matters as carbon sequestration, but reporters treat her as an expert on everything to do with climate change. She believes that “we need . . . to be witnessing professionals in our domain of expertise, but we also need to act with respect for colleagues who are the appropriate witnessing professionals in other domains.”²⁶ She keeps a list of experts in other fields, to which she refers reporters who ask questions that go beyond her professional competence. She doubts that most reporters, under deadline pressure, follow up. Her experience shows that even when scientists are scrupulous about their obligation to limit their witnessing to their area of expertise, journalists do not accept their claims of professional modesty. It is therefore not only scientists but also journalists and other professionals who must avoid the tendency to stretch expertise beyond its reasonable limits. That does not mean that professionals should never speak on matters outside their own field, but that if they do, they should make their qualifications clear. Misplaced expertise is a peril of witnessing that deserves constant attention from all professionals.

Some professionals are already responding to the call to bear witness to the harms that climate change is visiting upon the planet. They are reporting, warning, criticizing, and lobbying. We should encourage more to take up the cause, and not only the climate scientists but also physicians, lawyers, judges, public health officials, journalists, broadcast meteorologists, and undertakers. Part of the professional ideal of service demands witnessing. But I have also em-



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