

## SPECIAL REPORT ♦ INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

# Putting politics above scientific truth

**DANA WILLBANKS**, of the Climate Science Legal Defence Fund, explains why the Silencing Science Tracker they set up at Columbia University is so necessary in the USA today

SINCE THE 2016 presidential election, the USA has seen a rise in the number and severity of attacks on scientists, particularly from within the government.

This anti-science movement has had the effect of silencing critical voices from the scientific community as its members face harassment, abuse and personal and professional threats from those hoping to slow or prevent scientific progress. Funding cuts, political interference, censoring or altering research findings and other tactics have all been used to sow distrust in – and ultimately suppress – science.

In turn, this has reduced public trust in science and has had a profoundly chilling effect on scientists' ability to conduct their vital research and exercise their right to free speech.

In early 2018, the Sabin Centre for Climate Change Law at Columbia University and the Climate Science Legal Defence Fund created the Silencing Science Tracker. This database built on the organisations' existing partnership and overlapping missions of addressing climate change through advocacy and education.

The Sabin Centre also launched a similar database in response to then US President Donald Trump's administration's efforts to diminish the federal government's climate mitigation efforts, and the tracker was specifically designed to document the administration's staggering number of widespread attacks on science.

Following the 2020 election,

president Joe Biden promised to keep science at the forefront of his administration. Data from the tracker, however, shows the disheartening reality.

While the Biden administration has undertaken markedly fewer anti-science actions, it has been slow to undo earlier damage – damage that, in some cases, it continues to perpetuate. Moreover, anti-science efforts continue at state and local levels.

As of July 2024, the tracker has documented 531 cases of censorship, information suppression, misrepresentation of scientific facts and other policy or administrative anti-science actions in the USA.

The tracker includes any action by a government entity that restricts scientific research, education, discussion or the publication or use of scientific findings.

Government censorship, the category with the most violations – 167 and counting – includes subverting scientific information by making it difficult or impossible to find, often by changing official websites or publications.

Under the Trump administration, for example, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) was ordered to remove references to “climate change” from official documents, webpages and the agency's Climate Hubs website.

Sometimes, government censorship

goes beyond modifying public materials to suppress scientists' free speech, preventing them from speaking about matters integral to public health and safety.

In 2017, staff in the Natural Resources Conservation Service unit of the USDA – whose mission is to support agricultural producers' conservation efforts – were told to use other terms in place of “climate change”. That same year, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) staff were warned that speaking publicly about their work without undergoing multiple levels of review could result in disciplinary action.

And in September 2020, the Trump administration pressured the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention to edit or delay the release of the weekly Covid-19 Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports to align with the administration's messaging concerning the pandemic and its use of unverified and dangerous “cures” such as hydroxychloroquine to treat it.

Instances of government censorship have also been documented at state level. In January 2021, New York governor Andrew Cuomo told reporters at one of his daily Covid-19 briefings that he did not “really trust the experts”.

Soon after, it was reported that his administration excluded public health experts from pandemic response planning and vaccine rollout efforts and that many state health officials found out about major pandemic policy changes during news conferences.

The second most populated category on the tracker concerns the bias and misrepresentation of scientific findings, such as cherry-picking data to support a political purpose, disregarding findings when crafting public policy, or disclosing only those findings that support a certain conclusion. →



This disregard for science has real and devastating consequences



PICTURED: Young people march in Michigan, USA as part of the Global Climate Strike in 2019 while Donald Trump was president

→ Despite overwhelming scientific evidence and consensus to the contrary, Trump’s secretary of energy and Trump himself questioned the human causes of climate change, stating that “scientists say a lot of things” and “I don’t think

science knows, actually”.

This disregard for scientific reality is evident through the tracker. For example, in January 2020, Trump and his top advisers dismissed scientists’ and biodefence experts’ warnings about

the risks of Covid-19. Trump told his secretary of health and human services to “stop panicking” before downplaying the situation to reporters by asserting that it was “going to be just fine”.

As more than one million





CREDIT: Jim West/Alamy

American families know firsthand, this disregard for science had real and devastating consequences.

These are just a few of the many egregious examples of attacks on science that have been documented.

## When the government ignores science, it's like a truck driver who wears a blindfold and drives based on what is whispered into his ear

Other examples include the misrepresentation of medical science as it relates to abortion, such as the Texas Department of State Health Services suggesting that abortion causes breast cancer; several state legislatures passing laws that force doctors to tell their patients that medication abortions can be reversed; funding cuts at federal agencies to research studies and to programmes such as the EPA's Children's Health Research Programme; and the termination of advisory committees and the disbanding of scientific panels.

The sustained attack on scientists and the chipping away of public trust in science have had serious impacts on public health, environmental protection and climate change mitigation efforts, both at home and abroad.

While the USA was once considered a world leader in science and innovation, the continued prioritisation of politics over truth has damaged that standing – perhaps irreparably so.

Heartbreaking firsthand accounts reveal the deep personal harm caused by the anti-science movement. People whose homes have been destroyed by extreme weather events, those who have experienced medical emergencies that leave lasting damage, and those who have lost loved ones to Covid-19 have suffered the consequences of a government prioritising political gain over the wellbeing of its people.

When sitting members of Congress publicly declare that masks and vaccines do not slow the spread of Covid-19, people listen – with devastating results.

While these shorter-term impacts on scientific research and public policy are well documented, the long-term impacts

will reverberate for years to come.

With the prospect of the return of another anti-science administration, we are once again highlighting this tool to remind us all of the ongoing fight against misinformation.

We know that it has an impact. The Silencing Science Tracker has been referenced in congressional hearings and reports and in letters by members of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Along with other work we do in support of stronger federal scientific integrity policies, the tracker helps bring attention and, therefore, positive changes to anti-science measures that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Scientists and others who have witnessed or experienced these attacks have bravely come forward to share their stories. These accounts bring home the personal and professional repercussions that too many in the scientific community face when simply trying to perform and publish their research.

As Michael Gerrard, founder and faculty director of the Sabin Centre, said at the launch of the tracker: “When the government ignores science, it's like a truck driver who wears a blindfold and drives based on what is whispered into his ear – dangerous and intolerable.”

It is critical that we all call out efforts to silence science, do our part to protect scientific freedom and integrity, and remove the blindfold of ignorance and apathy. ✕

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