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Science, politics and the media: the climategate disputes in France

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The 29th of October, a meeting organized by the Institute of Political Science in Paris¹ gathered numerous global warming's specialists, historians of science and sociologists in order to resume the last developments of the climate change controversy. Amongst the speakers, Daniel Boy, Professor at the IEP, presented his last results of the french polls on this issue. All the curves indicated a dramatic change in the public perception of the reality of the phenomenon, its threatening consequences and the course of actions it might require from the State.

Between 2009 and 2010, the number of persons who considered that global warming due to "an increase of the greenhouse effects was a certainty for most scientists" dropped from 70% to 51% (that is a decrease of 19 points) while in the same way the number of persons believing that global warming was "a hypothesis which scientists may have different opinions about" rose from 28% to 45%. Similar results were collected on various issues such as the reality of the link between climate disorders and greenhouse effects (from 50% to 37%), the inabilities of scientists "to give the real reasons for climate disorders" (36% to 44%), the necessities of implementing new policies and to change people's behaviour (61% to 52%) to thwart the increase of the greenhouse effects, etc. Particularly interesting is the fact that this change of attitudes affects mostly people with high educational standards.

Why is that? Is the French situation specific with regards to this apparent versatility of the public opinion?

The media coverage of the climate change is certainly as muddled in France as everywhere else except for Germany and Portugal. News published today are contradicting the news of the day before. Roughly one distinguishes three phases in the media coverage of the issue: in the first phase, until approximately 2003, the issue is not yet consolidated; uncertainties and controversial points of view have acquired some visibility if not credibility. *"In a second phase, from 2003 to 2009 the issue's "newsworthiness" has increased through the collective construction of a strong consensus. Divergent opinions and claims have some difficulties to access the media in this phase, and when they do succeed, they tend to provoke strong reactions. With recent developments, we might have entered a third phase by 2009, where all kinds of controversies get unprecedented public visibility."*² This last episode is the consequence of last global events (Copenhagen, climategate, etc) but is still quite surprising compared with German or Portuguese media coverage, which seem to allow less media space to the climatoskeptic discourse. It is also the consequence of what has been called the "Allègre affair", the singularities of which point to new relationship between science, media and politics in France.

¹ International conference : « Climate Controversies : Science & politics » organised by Université libre de Bruxelles and Iddri-Sciences Po Paris, Oct 29, 2010.

² Jean-Baptiste Comby, Helene Guillemot & Stefan Aykut, "Consensus, controversies and the construction of climate change as a public problem in France" in *Climate change controversies in the media - Sociological insights*, 20th and 21st September 2010, Paris.

Claude Allègre, who gave his name to the affair, is a well-known geophysicist, awarded by the Crafoord Prize, in the list of the 166 “Highly Cited” scientist of the Database ISI for France. He is also a prominent figure in French politics. He was minister of education and research in the last socialist government; he is currently supporting Nicholas Sarkozy after having to quit his ministry under the pressure of strike. He is known for his controversial stances on different scientific subjects largely taken up by all the media: he did argue for the non-toxicity of asbestos, and had a big fight on TV about the properties of the free fall of objects³. He is also known for his outburst on August Comte, mathematics, the usefulness of pedagogy and the well known laziness of teachers⁴. In brief, a true champion of populist ideas and “clichés” !

His climatoskeptical views were already well known and widely discussed in the media since 2006 and the publication of several climatoskeptical articles⁵. At this stage, scientists do criticize his public interventions without regarding them as a serious threat against the scientific consensus of IPCC. But in February 2010, the publication of his book entitled *Climatic imposture or the fake ecology*⁶, triggered very different reactions. It almost coincided with the announcement of the abandonment of the institution of a carbon tax in France. This project was supposed to show the ecological engagement of the government and the success of the ecological lobby. Allègre’s book came as a defence of the position of the government: the fight against global warming should not be a priority. The publication of the book came two months after the Copenhagen conference. It radically changed the attitude of the French community of scientists working within the IPCC network, more specifically in relation to the importance of the scientific communication of their results to the general public. For them, Copenhagen had been a complete failure: “the battle had been lost”. But what is this battle about? Of course, the battle is above all political. Science by itself did not succeed to overcome the opponents of appropriate regulatory policies. In February, Allègre’s best seller and its omnipresence in all the French media, make scientists realise that the battle had also to be fought on this ground of public communication.

Politicians as well as scientists have had a hard time in opposing the theses defended by the book. The strength of Allègre’s interventions in the media rested on the way he switches from one discourse to the other depending of the media or the interviewer.

Several typologies have been done of the skeptic’s movement. Saffron J. O’Neill and Max Boykoff⁷ make a distinction between three types of skeptic attitudes and discourses. First, the “skeptic” who is critically assessing the data and/or the theories which concerns about global warming are based upon, the “deniers” who do believe in global warming but who deny the risks suggested by science and as a result deny any need to take action. The last are the “contrarians” who are deniers combined with failure to distinguish between three separate spheres: skepticism upon climate science, the role of the state and policy priorities. Allègre’s double status as

³ “Allègre perd la boule”, *Canard Enchaîné*, 24/02/1999.

⁴ “Mathematics do not constitute a science” or “ Mathematics and their abstract rigour played only a weak role in the successive discoveries which made it possible to build modern science”, also in Claude Allègre, *La Défaite de Platon*, 1995

⁵ Claude Allègre, “Neiges du Kilimandjaro”, *L’Express*, 21/09/2006. Claude Allègre, « La hausse globale des températures n’est pas le phénomène essentiel », *L’Express*, 5 oct 2006.

⁶ Claude Allègre, *L’imposture climatique ou la fausse écologie*, Plon, Feb. 2010, 293p,

⁷ S.J. O’Neill, M. Boykoff., “Climate denier, skeptic, or contrarian?”, *PNAS* 2010 107 (39) E151; published ahead of print August 31, 2010

scientist and politician allows him to adopt one hat or another, dismissing scientific arguments by relying on the global political relevance of his own argument and dismissing political arguments by referring implicitly to his own scientific fame.

At this time, the scientific community understands that to continue disputing Allègre's ideas within the media arena does not lead anywhere. They adopt a new strategy which will reveal itself quite ambiguous. The 1st of April, between 400 and 600 scientists, as different from each other as the disciplines and the specialities they represent, but all involved in IPCC, published a petition⁸ against the « lies » of Claude Allègre, asking their minister, Valérie Pécresse, as their employer, to reassert the scientific status and the seriousness of their work and to prevent further public diffusion of additional « lies » by Claude Allègre and his colleague, Vincent Courtillot.

One of Allègre's biggest crime according to the signatories of the petition is to have published under the cover of scientific background without peer control. Strangely enough, this point is largely ignored while all scientists recognise the need to provide the public with factual information and explain their own work. Yet, they are well aware that the requirements of a good popularising of their research are extremely difficult to achieve. They know also that in order to do so, it will be very difficult to avoid the political dimensions of their scientific work while, at the same time, they advocate for a clear-cut separation between science and politics. Surprisingly, instead of committing themselves to this aim, they appeal to the political authority of the Minister for settling the matter. In doing so, they put their own scientific autonomy in danger.

This petition was followed by numerous reactions in the media, generally condemning this appeal for a political intervention in what was considered by most journalists and popularisers as a scientific debate between experts. Such a media move is contradictory as many debaters like Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond⁹ or Benoît Rittaud¹⁰ have pointed out in the media. Bruno Latour's position presented in *Le Monde*¹¹ is also ambiguous. Recognizing the impossibility to disentangle expert's science from politics, Latour advocates for a new distinction between science and research. While the former is an area of undisputable facts prone to be popularized in a traditional way (reinforcing autonomy and control of the scientific communities on the public divulgation of « their » knowledge!), the latter integrates uncertainties within the field of scientific experimentation as well as within the field of political action. According to Latour, the « good » link between science and politics should involve a confrontation with uncertainties in both areas under the arbitration of the cautionary principle.

In the middle of this confusion which did not spare any scientist nor politician, the strongest and clearest commitment to defend the advocates of the threat of global warming, were two journalists, Sylvestre Huet and Stéphane Foucart from the national daily newspapers *Liberation* and *Le Monde*. They became the flag-bearers of the scientific community. Huet's book, “ *He is*

⁸ <http://sites.google.com/site/appeclimat/home>

⁹ Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond, Le scientifique, le climat et le politique, *Libération*, 8 April 2010.

¹⁰ Benoît Rittaud, Lettre ouverte aux signataires de l'appel « Éthique scientifique et sciences du climat » ou Marc Mennessier, Un mathématicien dénonce le « carbocentrisme », *Le Figaro*, 3 April 2010

¹¹ Bruno Latour, Quand le principe de précaution déstabilise le rationalisme à la française, *Le Monde*, 22 mai 2010,.

the sham”¹², pointed out all the scientific mistakes and inaccuracies in Allègre’s book in order to discredit the political argument of the geophysicist. The journalist attacked with scientific arguments. His personal blog, hosted by *Libération*, is widely read and commented by scientists, experts and enlightened amateurs.

A curious conference held in Paris in September 2010 on « Climate change controversies in the media »¹³ organised by the CNRS gives an idea of the fallout of this episode. The conference intended to present the works of sociologists or science historians, who would present different case studies (US, UK, France, Portugal, Sweden, Germany...), and endeavour to explain how climate change is “manufactured“ in the media of these countries. The majority of the audience was constituted by natural scientists who got lost in the subtle differences of sociological concepts. They explained quite blandly how they did sign the petition a few months before and were shocked by the way Allègre had won the dispute and by the way the battle against “climatoskeptic” had been lost. They were particularly surprised that the media did “misunderstand their petition” and how they badly reacted. Their only explanation for the media reaction was to blame the presentation of the petition and not the content itself of the protest. So natural scientists attended this conference in order to understand how media were working. They wanted to know how to convince journalists and to understand what went wrong. Therefore the incomprehension was total between audience and speakers. Natural scientists were eager to engage themselves in the fight and claim responsibility for a clear engagement, sociologists and historians did not want to assess the behaviour of journalists on this case. The first left the meeting frustrated by the lack of media recipes¹⁴, the second by the disinterest of their audience about the evidence suggesting that “the influence of Climategate and climate skeptics more generally is overestimated”¹⁵. Allègre’s name was barely pronounced during the entire seminar; no mention to the petition or to the special session of the Academy of the Sciences on global warming was made during the talks.

Quite a few journalists were engaged in their coverage of global warming but scientists didn’t help much by unfairly putting on them the responsibility of the deficiencies in understanding the issue within the public. When the media pay attention to the climatoskeptic, they are suspected to offer an unhoped-for platform to the shams. If not, they are blamed for not respecting the equilibrium between actors especially when they are politicians.

Olivier Godard¹⁶ made a nice comparison between media coverage of sport and science. In both

¹² Sylvestre Huet, *L'imposteur, c'est lui: Réponse à Claude Allègre*, Stock, April 2010, 198 p.,

¹³ « Climate change controversies in the media - Sociological insights », 20th and 21st September, Paris.

¹⁴ On the 10th of September the Institut Pierre-Simon Laplace organized a meeting of the LSCE (Laboratoire des Sciences du Climat et de l’Environnement) with several “schools of journalism” (Lille, Paris) in order to ask journalists to help them communicating their results to the general public. Natural scientists were in demand of recipes in order to improve their scores in the “mediatic battle”. They were still utterly distraught by Copenhagen’s failure. Actually, they were suddenly aware that it is not enough to be scientifically right in order to win the political and the mediatic battle about global warming.

¹⁵ “The frame contest over climate change in the U.S. media. Exaggerated fears and overlooked impacts” Matthew Nisbet at « Climate change controversies in the media - Sociological insights » Conference, 20th and 21st September, Paris

¹⁶ Olivier Godard, « Le climat, l’imposteur et le sophiste », *Alternatives économiques*, 12 mars 2010.

case journalists may give their appreciation of the results, of the value of the sportsmen in competition or scientists in quarrel. They can organize debates and bet on the winner. In both cases it does not influence the result of the game. In science however the public cannot observe with its own eyes the tests and their results. There is no science without modeling, construction abstraction and the public need a special knowledge. Without it, lay audience will consider both sides of a scientific dispute as equal and will have to “choose” one side depending on personal beliefs, tastes and/or trust they have in such or such media; politicians or scientists.

This practical problem applies to every subject in science popularisation, but in the case of the climate change, journalists have to fight another problem. The results of climatology seem to be directly accessible to everybody. Is there anything more concrete, immediate and visible than the weather we comment on every day, the heat we felt last summer or the freezing cold we are suffering this winter? How to resist comparing what comes from our direct experience and what comes from the lab? Since they cannot rely on a precise explanation of the methods used in science —especially when these methods are extremely abstract and complex like the modeling practices in climate science—, popularisers have accustomed us to relate their presentation of scientific results to some kind of reality (examples taken from everyday life, images, scientific objects in museums, etc.). The task of convincing the public not to assess a science through an examination of how it manages to help on an everyday basis, is well known by journalists dealing with economics. Perhaps the biggest challenge for science journalists in the future will be to succeed where these journalists have often failed. To start with, —as mentioned by Myke Hulme (2010) following Lorraine Whitmarsh— there is a terminological problem : the media will certainly have to be more careful in their use of the terms and may have to forget using the word “climate” when speaking about climate change, especially in French where the need of a new terminology makes itself felt to avoid the confusion entailed by the use of “*climat*” in “*réchauffement climatique*” to translate “global warming”.

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