

# Peer Review And 'Pal Review' In Climate Science



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Opinion

*I write about the interface of public science and public policy*

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Publishing in the scientific literature is supposed to be tough. Submit a manuscript to a reputable journal and it will go through "peer review," where your equals criticize your work, send their comments to a journal editor and then the editor will decide whether to accept your submission, reject it outright, or something in between.

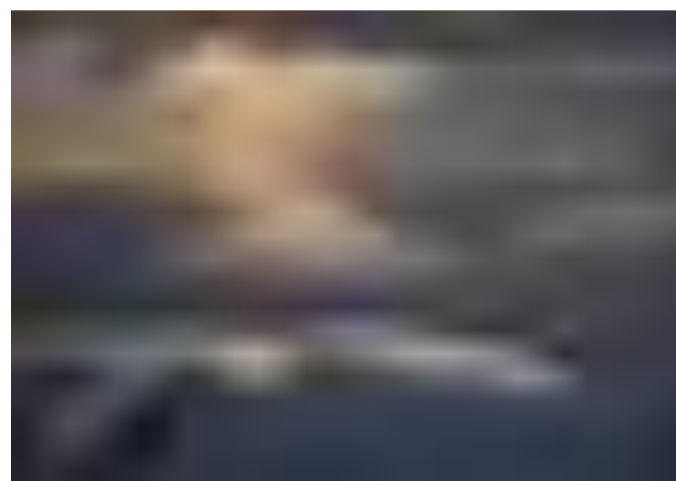


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In order to limit any bias caused by personal or philosophical animosity, the editor should remove your name from the paper and send it to other experts who have no apparent conflict of interest in reviewing your work. You and the reviewers should not know who each other are. This is called a "double blind" peer review.

Well, this is "the way it is supposed to be." But in the intellectually inbred, filthy-rich world of climate science, where billions of dollars of government research money support trillions of dollars of government policy, peer review has become anything but that.

There is simply no "double blindness." For reasons that remain mysterious, all the major climate journals leave the authors' names on the manuscripts sent out for review.

Economists, psychologists and historians of science all tell us (and I am inclined to believe them) that we act within our rational self-interest. Removing the double-blind restriction in such an environment is an invitation for science abuse.

What about if my professional advancement is dependent upon climate change monies (which applies to just about every academic or government climatologist)? I'm liable to really like a paper that says this is a horrible and important problem, and likely to rail against an author who says it's probably a bit overblown. May God have mercy on any manuscript that mentions the rather large elephant in the room which is that we probably can't do much about it anyway.

Such "confirmation bias" has been noted and studied for years, but the response of science in general -- and atmospheric science in particular -- has only been to make things worse.

Peer review has become "pal review." Send a paper to one of the very many journals published by the American Geophysical Union--the world's largest publisher of academic climate science--and you can suggest five reviewers. The editor doesn't have to take your advice, but he's more likely to if you bought him dinner at the last AGU meeting, isn't he? That is, of course, unless journal editors are somehow different than government officials, congressmen, or you.

Or, if you get wind that someone is about to publish something threatening your gravy train, maybe you can cajole the editor to keep it out of print for a year while you prepare a counter-manuscript.

That's what the "Climategate" gang did with the *International Journal of Climatology* when University of Rochester's David Douglass submitted a paper. His work showed that a large warming at high altitudes in the tropics--one of the major ways in which the enhanced greenhouse effect is supposed to change the climate--isn't happening. For the gory details, [click here](#). The story on this one is still unfolding as the journal has declined to publish a sequel to the counter-manuscript.

Or you could simply ignore manuscripts sent to you that find problems with [temperature histories](#).

But there has to be a gold standard somewhere, right? Perhaps the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS)?

Dream on. If you are a member of the National Academy, you can submit four manuscripts a year, called "contributed papers" as long as you do the "peer review" yourself! That's right: you send your manuscript to two of your friends, and then mail your paper along with their comments. Again, pal review.

The PNAS editor then rubber-stamps the results. In fact, the editor probably goes through quite a few rubber stamps a year, given that only 15 of the 800-odd contributed papers submitted in the last year were rejected. For comparative purposes, *Nature* would have *accepted* only about 50 out of that number.

A recent paper submitted to PNAS by National Academy member Richard Lindzen was afforded special treatment. The editor insisted that it be held to a different standard of review because of its "political implications." Lindzen's research found that carbon dioxide warming is likely to be much lower than what is being calculated by current climate models.

So what about the legion of alarmist papers from NASA firebrand James Hansen that PNAS publishes via pal review? Don't they have "political implications" too? In the mind of our National Academy, apparently some political implications are more equal than others.

There's a lot of confirmation bias working in Hansen's favor, because it's back to the back of the plane for ham-and-egger climate scientists if Lindzen is right. That's where the "political implications" get personal.

There's a lot more to this story. Lindzen eventually published his paper--which actually benefited from a real review--in an obscure journal. But the next time you think that peer review is unbiased, think of confirmation bias, pal review and Climategate, and try to figure a way out of the mess that climate science has gotten itself into.

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I am Director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute and a senior fellow in research and economic development at George Mason University. My wri... **Read More**