

Deception, Distortion, and Misinformation about Climate Science

Originally published 12/9/16 at GreatLakesBasin.com
Updated 2/19/17

Book Review:

Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming

By Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway

Bloomsbury Press, New York, 2010

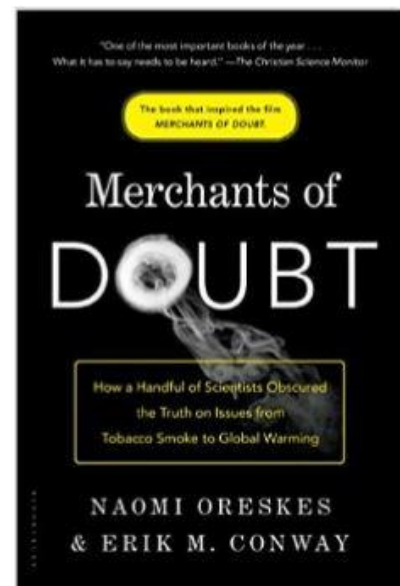
Reviewed by David M. Freedman

Published in 2010, *Merchants of Doubt* tracks the relentless, ideologically driven (and industry-funded) efforts of physicists Frederick Seitz, S. Fred Singer, Bill Nierenberg, Robert Jastrow, and a “handful” of other scientists (none of them climate or atmospheric scientists) to discredit well-established scientific consensus on the anthropogenic causes of climate change. To accomplish this mission, they did very little original scientific research. They mainly cherry-picked, distorted, and falsified existing research.

In addition to clouding up the field of climate science, they tried to deceive the public about the health hazards of tobacco smoke and the environmental damage caused by acid rain and CFCs. In the process, this handful of men shamelessly attempted to tarnish the reputations of esteemed climate scientists like [Benjamin D. Scanter](#), an atmospheric scientist at Lawrence Livermore National Lab, and [F. Sherwood Rowland](#), who won a Nobel Prize in chemistry.

The underlying objective of these “merchants of doubt” was to insulate certain industries — tobacco, pesticide manufacturers, carbon-based energy producers, etc. — from regulations that might affect profits.

The authors Oreskes and Conway, science historians, show in detail how politically motivated scientists can create an illusion of two-sided debate in a fairly settled area of science, and then



compel the news media to present “both sides of the debate” as though it were in the interest of fairness.

Toward the end of their book, Oreskes and Conway get a little preachy: “Rome may not be burning, but Greenland is melting, and we are still fiddling.”

The last couple of chapters include a superficial discussion of free-market capitalism, free-market fundamentalism, and Cornucopianism (the opposite of Malthusian economics) as they relate to science and science denial. This raises a few questions in my mind:

- Can we depend on technological innovation to solve potentially catastrophic problems related to global climate change, as the Cornucopians hope?
- Will there always be a technological solution to every problem?
- Can technological innovation thrive in a judiciously regulated economy, or must we deny and discredit any scientific discovery that might lead to new regulatory restrictions on exploitation, production, and emission?

Now in 2017 the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space, and Technology (chaired by Lamar Smith of Texas) is conducting its own campaign of climate change denial. U.S. Attorney General (former Alabama Senator) Jeff Sessions calls climate change a conspiracy theory. Scott Pruitt, former attorney general of Oklahoma and a tool of the fossil fuel industry, is the EPA administrator. A new contingent of politically motivated science distorters and deceivers are at work, including hydrologist Jay Lehr, who has spent time in prison for fraud and is the science editor of the Heartland Institute, which has been funded by Philip Morris, Exxon, and the Charles G. Koch Foundation. The Heartland Institute currently claims that the U.S. EPA’s 1972 ban on DDT in the United States has resulted in the deaths of a million Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. Never mind that DDT was not banned outside of the USA, and in fact, certain insects have developed resistance to DDT as a result of overuse in some African countries.

#

About the reviewer

David M. Freedman has worked as a financial and legal journalist since 1978. He earned a bachelor’s degree in geography from the University of Illinois at Chicago.