

A state of denial

Case studies of climate censorship in Wyoming reveal the insidious nature of modern science suppression

By Gabrielle Wong-Parodi

Amid growing concern that environmental science will be suppressed by the new administration, scientists and others across the United States have been racing to archive federal climate data. Jeffrey Lockwood's *Behind the Carbon Curtain*, which tells the story of corporate and political climate science censorship in Wyoming, offers a glimpse into the many forms that scientific suppression can take, giving tangible examples that will do little to quell the growing fear many concerned citizens are feeling around the country.

In this provocative page-turner, Lockwood shines a light on acts of censorship that he alleges have been committed by the Wyoming energy industry and state politicians in the hope of potentially shifting “the balance of power ever so slightly to bring us closer to a tipping point of outrage, action, and change.”

Wyoming provides an ideal lens through which to explore the blurring of corporate interests and the power of the state. Wyoming is often referred to as the “energy colony of the United States”; its economy is relatively simple, being nearly wholly dependent on fossil fuel and other extractive industries. Lockwood maintains that Wyoming's strong dependence on the energy industry “drives [state] politicians and state agencies to battle any regulation hindering fossil fuels—and to silence anyone who might impede extraction by raising concerns for environmental and human well-being.”

Wyoming is a small and relatively homogeneous state, allowing for clarity in political positions and stakeholder identity. The state's citizen legislatures are also in the habit of “put[ting] their cards on the table.” “[W]hat would be hidden as career-ending corruption in other states is worn as a badge of loyalty,” Lockwood writes, making its state government relatively transparent.

Lockwood begins with the story of *Carbon Sink: What Goes Around Comes Around*, a land art sculpture created by British environmental artist Chris Drury. Installed in 2011 on the University of Wyo-

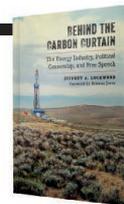
oming's campus, *Carbon Sink* featured logs from trees killed by pine beetles arranged in an elegant spiral and interspersed with lumps of coal. The installation drew connections between beetle outbreaks and human-caused climate change that allowed the insects to flourish.

The backlash was immediate. Local officials declared the sculpture an “insult to the tens of thousands of people across Wyoming that work hard to produce energy,” and energy industry representatives threatened to pull millions in promised donations should the sculpture remain on campus. Lockwood describes a series of disturbing events, including an incident in which a university administrator privately bragged about sending an image of himself urinating on the installation to a member of the state legislature. A full year before its scheduled removal, the university quietly destroyed the sculpture under the pretense that it was irreparably damaged by a broken sprinkler.

In another example, Lockwood recounts the story of Geoffrey Thyne, a geochemist at the University of Wyoming who was pressured to write a letter of retraction after providing a local newspaper with scientific estimates for the amount of water required for fracking. Soon after, Thyne's contract at the University of Wyoming's Enhanced Oil Recovery Institute (EORI) was not renewed. This, writes Lockwood,

Behind the Carbon Curtain
The Energy Industry, Political
Censorship, and Free Speech

Jeffrey A. Lockwood
University of New Mexico
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had a “chilling effect” on the remaining research staff at EORI, who are employed on 1-year, at-will contracts.

Other stories highlight an arguably more insidious flavor of censorship: self-censorship. In 2012, David Throgmorton, the well-respected director of the Carbon County Higher Education Center, questioned a proposed \$2 billion coal-to-liquid conversion plant in his regular opinion column in the *Rawlins Daily Times*. Worried about the energy industry's reaction, Carbon County commissioners sent a letter to the Education Center's board demanding that Throgmorton be censored for his “self-serving attempt to cast doubt on [the project].” Despite the board's unequivocal support, Throgmorton quit writing his column, citing the need for the Education Center to maintain good relationships with industry: “Every time I sit down to write about something (controversial), I'm suddenly thinking, ‘Who am I going to alienate with this one that is going to do us damage?’”

For those moved to take action by this book, Lockwood advises a mix of courage and caution. His job as a tenured professor at the University of Wyoming is secure; he can and is obligated to speak truth to power no matter how uncomfortable. But each of us must decide what free speech is worth compared with the cost of speaking out. ■

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PODCAST

Scienceblind
Why Our Intuitive Theories About
the World Are So Often Wrong

Andrew Shtulman
Basic Books, 2017. 319 pp.

Although it's tempting to attribute science denial to a complex interplay of political, economic, and religious motivations, the root of many misconceptions may be more straightforward. This week on the *Science* podcast, Jennifer Golbeck interviews cognitive scientist Andrew Shtulman about how children form intuitive, but often wrong, theories about the world and what makes these ideas so hard to shake. sciencemag.org/podcasts

10.1126/science.aan4200



Children require explanations of gravity and perspective before they will reject the intuitive theory that Earth is flat.

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Editor's Summary

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