

The smoke behind the deniers' fires

It isn't just Exxon which has funded the climate change deniers – Big Tobacco has also played a strange role

It takes quite a lot to get Britain's most august scientific body, the Royal Society, riled. But now it has had enough. It is trying to bring an end to a ten-year campaign of disinformation about the world's most important scientific issue. Throughout that period, journalists who have no background in science, and who appear to know less about the subject than the average 12-year-old, have been filling the pages of the Mail, the Telegraph and the Times with articles claiming that manmade global warming is a fraud.

In January this year, for example, the Daily Mail's columnist Melanie Philips asserted that most of the atmosphere "consists of water vapour". She now admits that this was a mistake, but she still maintains that the planet was two degrees warmer 1,000 years ago, that there has been no overall rise in global sea levels and that as many glaciers are expanding as shrinking – all of which are just as wrong.

In the Times last month, Tim Hames maintained that "if man's activities were driving this warming process then one would expect the rate of that increase to have accelerated in modern times ... This evidence has singularly failed to materialise, despite satellites having been available to measure the Earth's temperature since the late 1970s." In fact, most of the global warming of the past 100 years has taken place since 1970 and the rate has accelerated rapidly.

In the Telegraph last week, Ruth Lea, the director of the rightwing Centre for Policy Studies, suggested that we need not worry about climate change because, when the earth's climate changed before, it gave rise to civilisation. She was denounced by the man whose research she claimed to be championing. Nick Brookes of the University of

MONBIOT | THE SMOKE BEHIND THE DENIERS' FIRES

East Anglia suggested that she had wilfully misinterpreted his work. “The distortion of science for ideological purposes,” he wrote, “has a long history, and the results are generally ugly.”

On the whole, these journalists did not generate the false stories they have been spreading. They are the unwitting dupes of a deliberate campaign of distortion and confusion. As I reveal on Newsnight tonight, the Society has now attempted to strike at the heart of this campaign by sending its first official letter of complaint to a corporation – the oil company Exxon. And yesterday its president, Lord Rees, sent the Telegraph what must be one of the most damning letters it has ever received.

“In her sixth article in five months which misrepresents the science of climate change in the Business Pages of The Daily Telegraph, Ruth Lea erroneously asserts that “there is wide scientific disagreement” about the likely impact of climate change. In fact, the peer-reviewed scientific literature, of which Lea appears to be completely unaware, shows that continued growth in greenhouse gas emissions will lead to a rise in global average temperature of between 1.4 and 5.8 centigrade degrees by 2100....”

But what the Royal Society didn't know, and I reveal in the first extract of my book today, is that part of the campaign of disinformation was started not by a fossil fuel company but by the tobacco company Philip Morris. It's a weird and profoundly disturbing story – the firm attempted to distract attention from its funding of a campaign to deny the effects of tobacco by funding people to deny climate change as well.

It provides yet more evidence that we have to be extremely wary of the groups and self-appointed experts campaigning against “risk-aversion” or “compensation culture” or “junk science” or “eco-fascism”. The chances are that someone is paying them to do it.

*George Monbiot's new book **Heat: how to stop the planet burning** is published by Penguin. He has also started a new website – www.turnuptheheat.org – exposing the false environmental claims being made by corporations and celebrities.*

MONBIOT | A CATALOGUE OF IDIOCY

MONBIOT | A CATALOGUE OF IDIOCY