

# Science popes and conflict of interests

“Beware of science popes”, science journalist Karel Knip of the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* recently warned at the annual conference of the *Vereniging van Onderzoeksjournalisten* (Dutch Belgian Association of Investigative Journalists). Such a ‘pope’ can dominate an entire field, and prevent contrary views from entering the official literature.

Far-fetched? In Utrecht, I talked to Tom van Hoof, a researcher who recently obtained his PhD. He produces CO<sub>2</sub>-reconstructions through research on leaf stomata. His results – even if indirectly – contradict Michael Mann’s climate reconstructions. Van Hoof knows the world of paleoclimatology by now and says: “Colleagues think my research is interesting enough to be published in *Science* or *Nature*, but for this I need to phrase it provocatively. I then run the risk, however, that I won’t get it past the referees and antagonise the ‘big shots’. I would like to continue as researcher in the field of paleoclimatology. So I prefer to let sleeping dogs lie.”

Journalists don’t have to fear for their careers if they publish a contrary opinion. On the contrary. Nevertheless, it becomes slightly sinister when the main character of an article – in this case Michael Mann – after the usual opportunity for both sides to have their say, directly contacts the chief editor of the magazine with the following text: “I hope you know what has been going on here, and that you are taking

steps to insure that the resulting article is appropriately balanced.” Mann also points out that the popular scientific journal *New Scientist* rejected an article by a freelance journalist about his critics McIntyre and McKittrick. An important argument for *New Scientist* was that McIntyre works as consultant for the exploration company CGX Energy. This background supposedly makes one by definition suspect in the climate debate. McIntyre himself says about this: “Nobody paid me to investigate Mann’s study. This may make me more independent than climate researchers whose research is funded.”

Anyone trying to bring some clarity to the climate debate soon notices that he enters a jungle of internet polemics, vested interests and politicised science. We thought that this was all the more reason to show in *Natuurwetenschap & Techniek* the true state of climate research. The ‘official’, peer reviewed scientific literature, which most science journalists take as the only source of truth, turns out to considerably contribute to the maligned crowning of scientific popes.

A good starting point for our story seemed to be a critical article in *Science* by the German scientist Hans von Storch on Mann’s hockey stick. When I asked him how difficult it was to get it accepted, he said: “This time it was easy, because for once we didn’t have Mann as a referee.” This is how the peer review system is used by science popes to create their own infallibility.

In the course of the research for this article, I am also facing a growing stream of emails from people who tried to get me to either believe or not believe McIntyre and McKittrick. The lobby in favour of Mann clearly dominates. Dutch climate researchers that we consulted also mostly portrayed them as crackpots on the internet.

This is not surprising, because their work has not yet been published in a mainstream scientific journal. However, in the course of my research for the article it became increasingly clear that McIntyre’s criticisms of the hockey stick were valid. Now, it turns out that one scientific journal is daring to take a risk after all: *Geophysical Research Letters* (GRL). All’s well that ends well for the two Canadians, but not for climate research as a whole. In the meantime, Mann doesn’t know yet about the forthcoming GRL article and continues with his aggressive criticisms, which usually get personal.

Hopefully the GRL publication will be a wake-up call for climate researchers and instigate an honest dialogue. The *Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* (NWO; Dutch Scientific Research Council) is certainly contributing to this. It will shortly organise a conference in response to the GRL article. Mann and McIntyre have been invited to participate in a direct debate there. ■

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