When Science Communication Becomes Difficult: Advice From The Battlefields

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Based on my 15 years of experience as a professional atmospheric scientist and amateur science communicator, I can confidently state that science communication usually goes really well. However, I will focus this presentation on the minority of times when it goes badly wrong.

I will give an example of a time when I was misquoted by a national newspaper: my suitably nuanced statement in the interview that "Reducing uncertainties in weather forecasts is a key research priority for the next ten years" ended up being printed as "Within ten years, I think we'll see a model that predicts the weather and climate change exactly". I will also give an example of a time when, at an organized event in Barcelona, I participated in a debate with a former MIT professor who is arguably the world's most famous disputer of climate change science. I will discuss how I handled both these difficult events, and I will give some advice on how to cope when science communication doesn't go according to plan.

I will finish with a plea not to over-simplify the scientific content when communicating with the public. There is evidence that doing so inclines people to under-value experts, which I believe may be a factor in public cynicism regarding climate change. The fact that I was recently quoted in The Times discussing the geekiest of topics in atmospheric science — the Coriolis force — demonstrates that there is a genuine public appetite for appropriate technical content in the mainstream media. I believe we must make the most of that appetite, in order to enthuse and inspire the next generation of geoscientists.