

Le Monde (page 1)

Tuesday 3 March 2015

CHRONIC

CLIMATE AND THE JUICY TRADE OF DOUBT

by Stéphane Foucart

Poor WeiHock "Willie" Soon! Across the Atlantic, the press is making a big deal of the turpitude of the American astrophysicist, and the titles are not exactly flattering. The unfortunate researcher of the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics is for some days in the middle of a nasty story whose main ingredients are climate, disgruntled interests of industrial fossil fuel and corruption of science. A story that, in this year of decisive climate negotiations, could only inflame passions. The object of the crime is recorded in the confidential documents of the Harvard Smithsonian.

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Climate and trade of the doubt

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Obtained by Greenpeace and the Climate Investigations Center at the end of legal procedures, they were published on 21 February.

These 131 pages are overwhelming. Within a decade, coal and petrochemical industrials paid, directly or through their false noses, some \$ 1.2 million for the searcher to look for. This was reflected by torturing all kinds of data in order to make them say anything provided it was a way to cast doubt on the extent of climate change, or on its human causes. A dozen "studies", led by Mr Soon, were published; in the vast majority of them, the astrophysicist hid its sources of funding, in contravention with the ethical rules.

Of course, the climate "work" of Mr Soon never abused the relevant scientific community. But it was systematically put forward, in particular by Republican senators, in order to challenge any measure against global warming. From this simple fact, Mr Soon had, in recent years, a major influence on American politics and public debate. *"If you doubt of anthropogenic climate change, Mr Soon is not only your man, humorously summarises the Washington Post. It is your high priest."*

All this is not completely new. In 2011, historians of science Naomi Oreskes (Harvard University) and Erik Conway (NASA) described, in a book (The Merchants of doubt, Le Pommier, 2012) recently brought to the screen, how a few scientists can handle the scientific language, speeches and codes to attack knowledge and systematically challenge embarrassing discoveries – from the harmfulness of cigarettes to acid rains through climate change.

Active role in operations

The novelty here is that the disclosed documents do not only reveal the actions of a lone researcher: they also show that the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, the result of a joint venture between two of the most prestigious American scientific institutions (Harvard University and the Smithsonian Institution), played an active role in these operations.

Mr Soon's requests for funding have all been formally transmitted to industrials through the highest authorities of the Harvard Smithsonian.

The institution then informed the sponsors of the work done by the scientist, presenting the papers that Mr Soon managed to get published as "deliverables", that is to say, as the object of a trading.

This is not all. The Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics also accounted in these "end products" its researcher's interventions in forums, sometimes unrelated with the scientific pretext of the financing, such as meetings organized by the Wall Street Journal with captains of industry ... All this has more to do with trading influence than with science. And to complete the picture, the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics levied about half of the amount invested by the industry, the other half benefiting Mr Soon.

In this case, the most disturbing is not the behaviour of an isolated researcher. It is the system set up by his institution, which partially changed into a communication laboratory, minting the prestige of its name with some interests that are eager to discredit science.

Interviewed by the Chronicle of Higher Education, Andrew Hoffman, a professor at the University of Michigan, clearly formulated: *"Why has Mr Soon been listened? Because there is "Harvard" after his name. Once you've removed it, who is Mr Soon? He is nobody."* Without having received any training in climate sciences (he has a doctorate in Space Engineering), Mr Soon published on a dizzying variety of topics: the rise of the sea in Bangladesh, polar bear populations in Hudson Bay, the mysterious (and largely phantasmagoric) correlations between solar activity and recent climate warming, the poisonous nature of the very idea of consensus science, etc. All this was not bound by any scientific program, but by the only desire to attack, often wrongly, the findings of climate scientists. The fact that Harvard University and the Smithsonian Institution have tolerated this situation for more than a decade raises questions.

The fact that they have financially benefited of it is incredible.