
Framing Science

Conflict and Consensus in Public Communication

Matthew Nisbet, Ph.D.



Over the coming decades, as society faces major collective choices on issues such as climate change, biomedical research, and nanotechnology, scientists and their organizations will

need to work together with the public to formulate effective policies and to resolve disputes. A major challenge for scientists will be to craft communication efforts that are sensitive to how diverse audiences process messages, but also to the way science is portrayed across types of media. In these efforts, scientists should adopt a language that emphasizes shared values and has broad appeal, avoiding the pitfall of seeming to condescend to fellow citizens or alienating them by attacking their beliefs. Part of this process includes “framing” an issue in ways that remain true to the science but that make the issue more personally meaningful, thereby potentially sparking greater interest or acceptance.

Prior registration is required for this event, see www.ncas.org for registration details

Matthew C. Nisbet, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor in the School of Communication at American University. As a social scientist he studies the nature and impacts of strategic communication in policy debates. His current work focuses on scientific and environmental controversies, examining the interactions between experts, journalists, and various publics. In this research, Nisbet examines how news coverage reflects and shapes policy, how strategists try to mold public opinion, and how citizens make sense of controversies.

**Friday, April 18, 2008
1 pm**

National Science Foundation
4201 Wilson Blvd, Room 375
Arlington, VA 22230
(Ballston Metro stop)

Enter NSF from the corner of 9th N & N Stuart Streets,
<http://www.nsf.gov/about/visit/>

**FREE admission – Everyone welcome,
members and non-members**

For more information, call the 24-hour NCAS
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National Capital Area Skeptics Public Lecture Series

20/20 SINCE 1987

Science Debate 2008

A concerned citizens initiative cosponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Council on Competitiveness, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine, and signed by more than 160 leading American universities and other organizations calls for a Presidential Debate on Science and Technology. Senators Clinton, McCain, and Obama have been invited to debate at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia on April 18, 2008. The event will be held even if only one candidate participates.

NCAS is one of the many organizations that have registered online as a supporter of the initiative, and Robert L. Park, recipient of the 2008 NCAS Philip J. Klass Award, is listed among the "Academic Leaders and Leading Scientists" category of signers. For more information, visit sciencedebate2008.com. 


Tired of Movies Where Psychics Are Always Real? by Eugene Ossa

Try the 1947 film noir, *Nightmare Alley*. I heard of it through Chip and Grace Denman, and had an opportunity to see it on a cable channel recently. It follows the life of a psychic performer from beginnings as a carnie huckster through sophisticated nightclub act, only to cross the entertainment line to a full-fledged con man.

It features not only several examples of cold reading, but also some techniques used in mentalism, always portraying it as a show, not real. In addition, it is a classic film noir with a great cast, including Tyrone Power and Joan Blondell.

Even though this is a dark movie, it is but a bowdlerized version of the book it's based on, which is far grittier and has no sugar coating at the end.

I don't want to exaggerate its debunking. For all its portrayal of psychics as being mentalist acts, it has one of the psychic performers doing private Tarot readings for her fellow performers that foreshadow the future events in the story. This artistic ambivalence allows the movie to have it both ways: psychics may be phony, but the Tarot knows. It also added an extra dimension for me because the ancient symbols in the Tarot deck they used (the Rider-Waite-Smith deck), rather than going back to the ancient Egyptians, as they claim, really date to 1909, when the deck was first published.

Still, great performances, cold readings, phony psychics, carnies, and a good story. Check it out or look for it on the classic movie channels: *Nightmare Alley*, 20th Century Fox, 1947, now on DVD. 

Torn From Today's Headlines

A series of comments made by Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr, senior pastor of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, include charges that the US government "...lied about inventing the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color" and infuses urban minority communities with addictive drugs.

NCAS's September 2007 lecture speaker on "Race-Based Urban Legends," Casey Lartigue, comments: "Rev. Jeremiah Wright is exactly the kind of person I was discussing in my talk before NCAS last September. He mixes examples of actual oppression against black Americans with race-based fantasies. He has seen too much during his lifetime and is having trouble moving on as times change. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that he has peddled other race-tinged conspiracy theories." Lartigue's lecture is available on DVD at NCAS events for \$15 for NCAS members and \$20 for non-members. 