



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on September 6, 2011

Resignation of Climate Change Editor Incites Inquiries

When Wolfgang Wagner resigned from Remote Sensing last week regarding controversial climate change research, it provoked curiosity amongst analysts. According to Wagner, there were issues related to the peer review process of published material and as a result, the material “should not have been published.” The research in question reportedly “cast doubt on man-made global warming,” a finding with which Wagner does not seem to agree.



The research, which had been published in July by the University of Alabama, included work by scientists Roy Spencer and William Braswell, which ultimately refuted the climate change models used by the United Nations. The research asserted that the U.N. overestimated how much global warming will occur in the future.

Wagner contends that the review process for the material was questionable, since those who reviewed the work were philosophically skeptical of the notion of manmade climate change. Wagner believes that the selection of such reviewers could have impacted the fairness of the review, but also asserts that it does not necessarily mean that anything unethical took place during the review process, or that any of the published material is necessarily wrong.

Wagner’s resignation explains:

From a purely formal point of view, there were no errors with the review process. But, as the case presents itself now, the editorial team unintentionally selected three reviewers who probably share some climate sceptic notions of the authors. This selection by itself does not mean that the review process for this paper was wrong....

The problem is that comparable studies published by other authors have already been refuted in open discussions and to some extent also in the literature (cf. [7]), a fact which was ignored by Spencer and Braswell in their paper and, unfortunately, not picked up by the reviewers. In other words, the problem I see with the paper by Spencer and Braswell is not that it declared a minority view (which was later unfortunately much exaggerated by the public media) but that it essentially ignored the scientific arguments of its opponents. This latter point was missed in the review process, explaining why I perceive this paper to be fundamentally flawed and therefore wrongly accepted by the journal.

According to Dr. Roy Spencer, however, that assertion is wholly inaccurate. He [wrote](#) in his blog:

But the paper WAS *precisely* addressing the scientific arguments made by our opponents, and



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showing why they are wrong! That was the paper's starting point! We dealt with specifics, numbers, calculations...while our critics only use generalities and talking points. There is no contest, as far as I can see, in this debate. If you have some physics or radiative transfer background, read the evidence we present, the paper we were responding to, and decide for yourself.

Wagner went on to write that media outlets such as [Forbes](#) and [Fox News](#) have relied too heavily on the study's conclusions to fully refute the notion of manmade climate change, and contends that doing so "just based on the comparison of one particular observational satellite data set with model predictions is strictly impossible."

Retraction Watch, a blog that follows scientific journals' retractions, [explains](#) the significance of Wagner's resignation:

We are not in a position to critique the claims. But we are curious: If Wagner feels he published the article in error, why not simply retract it? Was it really necessary to fall on his sword to make the point that he now feels he made a mistake in publishing the paper? It's a noble gesture, and not unprecedented for editors of climate journals, but is it best for science?

Forbes contributor William Pentland [believes](#) that there is at least some political motivation for Wagner's decision to step down. There is further evidence of this in that Wagner's resignation included a note of apology to Kevin Trenberth, a senior scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado. Trenberth was an outspoken critic of the published research and recently remarked that Wagner's resignation was both an "unusual and admirable step."

Unfortunately, because of Wagner's controversial resignation — which is a highly unusual decision when the research in question has not been retracted — a number of media outlets have called into question whether *Remote Sensing* should have even published research on the topic of climate change, as *Remote Sensing* does not routinely publish papers on climate change. To this, Dr. Spencer asserts, "Apparently, peer review is now carried out by reporters calling scientists on the phone and asking their opinion on something most of them do not even do research on. A sad day for science."



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