

10 Secrecy and science revisited

From politics to historical practice and back

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If conventional understandings of science were accurate representations of our world, the conjunction of science and secrecy might serve as a powerful example of an oxymoron. Writing in *Scientific American*, Jeffrey Richelson, a student of secret government intelligence programs, explained that the major source of difficulty in having cooperation of scientists with the US intelligence establishment was that such

cooperation will require an accommodation between two cultures, those of science and of intelligence, that have essentially opposite methods of handling information. In science, the unrestricted dissemination of data is accepted as being necessary for progress, whereas in intelligence, the flow of information is tightly restricted by a "need to know" policy; only those who have the proper security clearances and who cannot carry out their assigned responsibilities without certain knowledge or information are given access to it.¹

For Richelson and countless others, the distinctive character of science is manifested in its openness, that is, the unrestricted exchange of information and knowledge without regard for the race, creed, sex, or national origin of those involved in the exchange. Secrecy, however, is far from unknown within the world of science. All of us are familiar with the existence of a classified world of research, containing its own journals, meetings, and professional organizations. That world exists both within and apart from the world we experience on a daily basis. Even the materials, Richelson is addressing—the use of national intelligence databases to understand global environmental change, Project Medea—is predicated on the existence of a secret world where researchers, more often than not academics, produced the knowledge that we might now harvest.

Science and secrecy were not, and are not, the polar opposites of common understanding. Timothy Ferris, a regular *New Yorker* science writer, declared that

real science is a white hole that gushes information; scientists (astronomers especially) prefer to tell one another almost everything, because if they don't they can't build on each other's results. (The gravest concern of those who do classified work is that if they are cut off from such constant exchange their careers will wither).²