

Editorial

Taking Responsibility on Publishing the Controversial Paper “On the Misdiagnosis of Surface Temperature Feedbacks from Variations in Earth’s Radiant Energy Balance” by Spencer and Braswell, *Remote Sens.* 2011, 3(8), 1603–1613

Wolfgang Wagner

Institute of Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing, Vienna University of Technology (TU Wien),
Gusshausstrasse 27–29, A-1040 Vienna, Austria; E-Mail: ww@ipf.tuwien.ac.at;
Tel.: +43-1-58801-12225; Fax: +43-1-58801-12299

Received: 1 September 2011 / Accepted: 2 September 2011 /

Published: 2 September 2011

Peer-reviewed journals are a pillar of modern science. Their aim is to achieve highest scientific standards by carrying out a rigorous peer review that is, as a minimum requirement, supposed to be able to identify fundamental methodological errors or false claims. Unfortunately, as many climate researchers and engaged observers of the climate change debate pointed out in various internet discussion fora, the paper by Spencer and Braswell [1] that was recently published in *Remote Sensing* is most likely problematic in both aspects and should therefore not have been published.

After having become aware of the situation, and studying the various pro and contra arguments, I agree with the critics of the paper. Therefore, I would like to take the responsibility for this editorial decision and, as a result, step down as Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Remote Sensing*.

With this step I would also like to personally protest against how the authors and like-minded climate sceptics have much exaggerated the paper’s conclusions in public statements, e.g., in a press release of The University of Alabama in Huntsville from 27 July 2011 [2], the main author’s personal homepage [3], the story “New NASA data blow gaping hole in global warming alarmism” published by Forbes [4], and the story “Does NASA data show global warming lost in space?” published by Fox News [5], to name just a few. Unfortunately, their campaign apparently was very successful as witnessed by the over 56,000 downloads of the full paper within only one month after its publication. But trying to refute all scientific insights into the global warming phenomenon just based on the comparison of one particular observational satellite data set with model predictions is strictly impossible. Aside from ignoring all the other observational data sets (such as the rapidly shrinking sea ice extent and changes in the flora and fauna) and contrasting theoretical studies, such a simple

conclusion simply cannot be drawn considering the complexity of the involved models and satellite measurements.

The political views of the authors and the thematic goal of their study did, of course, alone not disqualify the paper from entering the review process in the journal *Remote Sensing*. As I stated in my editorial at the launch of this new open access journal [6] one of the premier goals of remote sensing as a discipline is to better understand physical and biological processes on our planet Earth. The use of satellite data to check the functionality of all sorts of geophysical models is therefore a very important part of our work. But it should not be done in isolation by the remote sensing scientists. Interdisciplinary cooperation with modelers is required in order to develop a joint understanding of where and why models deviate from satellite data. Only through this close cooperation the complex aspects involved in the satellite retrievals and the modeling processes can be properly taken into account.

In hindsight, it is possible to see why the review process of the paper by Spencer and Braswell did not fulfill its aim. The managing editor of *Remote Sensing* selected three senior scientists from renowned US universities, each of them having an impressive publication record. Their reviews had an apparently good technical standard and suggested one “major revision”, one “minor revision” and one “accept as is”. The authors revised their paper according to the comments made by the reviewers and, consequently, the editorial board member who handled this paper accepted the paper (and could in fact not have done otherwise). Therefore, 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. In science, diversity and controversy are essential to progress and therefore it is important that different opinions are heard and openly discussed. Therefore editors should take special care that minority views are not suppressed, meaning that it certainly would not be correct to reject all controversial papers already during the review process. If a paper presents interesting scientific arguments, even if controversial, it should be published and responded to in the open literature. This was my initial response after having become aware of this particular case. So why, after a more careful study of the pro and contra arguments, have I changed my initial view? 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. This regrettably brought me to the decision to resign as Editor-in-Chief—to make clear that the journal *Remote Sensing* takes the review process very seriously.

Let me conclude with saying that even considering this unfortunate case I think *Remote Sensing* is an excellent journal which has achieved a high scientific standard within the very short period since its start in January 2009. The start of every new journal is challenging because authors, reviewers, and editors need to become familiar with the journal. New journals are often unattractive to many authors as the papers are not (yet) indexed by the prominent citation databases. In that sense, I was very happy

to learn in May 2011 that *Remote Sensing* was already accepted for inclusion in Scopus, Europe's most important citation database. This success became possible primarily due to the excellent work done by the editorial team of MDPI who give their best to make sure that the review process is handled as quickly as possible without compromising on quality of the review process. I would also like to thank all members of the editorial board, reviewers, and authors of *Remote Sensing* very much, who helped to give this first open access remote sensing journal a good start. I will continue supporting the journal, albeit in different roles, wishing it all the best for the future!

References and Notes

1. Spencer, R.W.; Braswell, W.D. On the misdiagnosis of surface temperature feedbacks from variations in Earth's radiant energy balance. *Remote Sens.* **2011**, *3*, 1603-1613.
2. *Climate Models Get Energy Balance Wrong, Make too Hot Forecasts of Global Warming*; 26 July 2011. Available online: <http://www.uah.edu/news/newspages/campusnews.php?id=564> (accessed on 1 September 2011).
3. Spencer, R. Personal Homepage. Available online: <http://www.drroyspencer.com/> (accessed on 1 September 2011).
4. *New NASA Data Blow Gaping Hole in Global Warming Alarmism*; 27 July 2011. Available online: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jamestaylor/2011/07/27/new-nasa-data-blow-gaping-hole-in-global-warming-alarmism/> (accessed on 1 September 2011).
5. *Does NASA Data Show Global Warming Lost in Space?* Available online: <http://www.foxnews.com/scitech/2011/07/29/data-cooling-on-global-warming/> (accessed on 1 September 2011).
6. Wagner, W. A better understanding of our Earth through *Remote Sensing*. *Remote Sens.* **2009**, *1*, 1-2.
7. Trenberth, K.E., Fasullo, J.T., O'Dell, C., Wong, T. Relationships between tropical sea surface temperature and top-of-atmosphere radiation. *Geophys. Res. Lett.* **2010**, *37*, L03702.

© 2011 by the authors; licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).