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Mixed messages with work in progress about the universe

Simon Grose

DISRUPTIVE alternative views that anger a current orthodoxy, leave their proponents ostracised and intrigue the masses are part and parcel of science. The legendary example is Galileo's case for the sun being the centre of a solar system in which Earth is a planet.

Another correct alternative theory earned Western Australia's Barry Marshall and Robin Warren a Nobel Prize in 2005. It took about a decade of often vehement rejection before the gastroenterologists of the world accepted that a bacterium causes stomach ulcers.

Cold fusion was an alternative theory which challenged the dominant paradigm and attracted popular attention before being filed in the garbage bin of furdrydom.

MARKETPLACE

So to the claims made about 10 years ago by Australian archaeologists that they had found evidence of humans living in northern Australia at least 100,000 years ago. Scepticism about global warming being caused by our fossil-fuelled emissions is headed the same way, but it's a journey yet to be completed. The urgency of the issue, its global nature and potentially catastrophic implications only serve to strengthen the zeal of sceptics, heighten the frustration of mainstream scientists and leave average punters hankering for the cost-free complacency that sceptics promise. The high level of interest generated by The Great Global Warming Swindle program broadcast last week exemplifies this dynamic.

But there are bigger scientific issues to have alternative views about, like the nature of the universe. And you need go no further than Canberra to find leading exponents of both the current orthodoxy and the disruptive alternative. An electrical engineer, Wal Thornhill, is co-author of a new book, The Electric Universe.

It is his latest effort to promulgate a theory of which he has been a leading global exponent for several years. Like many alternative theories it appears to be internally consistent and comprehensive, draws from the theories of both reputable and radical theorists, and is tinged with conspiracy theories about why it has been rejected by orthodox cosmology. It dismisses the ideas that the universe originated from the Big Bang about 13 billion years ago and is still expanding. Instead the universe is static, much smaller than commonly thought, and of unknowable age. The sun and all the other stars are not thermonuclear reactions but electrical transformers "great concentrated balls of lightning" which behave as electrodes for galactic electrical discharges. Craters on the moon and other heavenly bodies are the scars of huge electrical discharges, not of the impacts of meteors and asteroids. And redshift, the variation in light perceived from distant stars which indicates their distance from Earth and the speed at which they are moving, is nothing of the sort.

COMMUNITY

Thornhill's theory invokes the work of Halton Arp, who he hails as "the Galileo of the 20th century" to argue that redshift is intrinsic to galaxies and tells us their age, not distance or speed.

A global leader of the orthodoxy that Thornhill tilts at is Dr Brian Schmidt, of Mt Stromlo Observatory, who was named overnight as co-winner of the \$US500,000 Gruber Cosmology Prize. This is the latest of a long list of accolades Schmidt has received (a list that may ultimately include a Nobel Prize) for his co-discovery in the 1990s that the universe is not only expanding but doing so at an accelerating rate.

After having a look at Thornhill's website this week, Schmidt said via email, "Some of it might be right, but there is nothing up here that actually passes scientific scrutiny."

He acknowledges that the current orthodox theory of the universe is incomplete the fact that about 90 per cent of the matter in the universe is "missing" is a telling flaw but it is a work of scientific discovery in progress. "Many people complain that the standard model of cosmology has too many complications to be a good theory, and many alternatives have been, and are being developed. "However, as of yet, no one has come up with a simpler theory that predicts the universe as we see it as well as this standard model does."

CONTACT

As in the global warming debate, scientific understanding of the universe is based on sometimes conflicting data of differing degrees of significance and is a process of eliminating uncertainty to achieve consensus rather than unanimity. "A consensus view I usually take when more than 95 per cent of the community feels one way it is rare for the community ever to agree on anything to more than 99 per cent," Schmidt said.

Thornhill rejects the consensus approach: "The truth is not determined by a show of hands, particularly where there is a form of mob coercion in academia. Consensus generates a false sense of cognitive security and discourages dissent. Mainstream cosmologists are going to look pretty silly when they are forced to admit that dissident astronomers are right. Until some event forces their hand they are in denial and hide behind mob consensus."

The tension and veiled bitterness behind these remarks can be found in the statements of global warming sceptics, just as Schmidt's attitude mirrors that of the majority of climate scientists when, as in the careful language adopted in reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, they frame their conclusions in terms of probability.

This acceptance of uncertainty by scientists can be a source of disappointment and an escape route for politicians and citizens. So it is proving to be on global warming. We can be thankful that politicians are not masters of a democratic universe.

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Simon Grose writes about science and technology.

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