

**Wednesday, October 29, 2014**

*Edward P. Bass Distinguished Scholars Lecture*

***Democracy and the Science Communication Environment***

Speaker:

**Dan Kahan**

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Yale Law School



**Wednesday, October 29, 2014**

**4:30 PM**

**Peabody Museum of Natural History Auditorium  
170 Whitney Avenue**

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**Reception to follow presentation:**

**Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History Great Hall**

**ABSTRACT:**

Promoting public comprehension of science is only one aim of the science of science communication and is likely *not* the most important one for the well-being of a democratic society. Ordinary citizens form quadrillions of correct beliefs on matters that turn on complicated scientific principles they cannot even identify much less understand. The reason they fail to converge on beliefs consistent with scientific evidence on certain other consequential matters—from climate change to genetically modified foods to compulsory adolescent HPV vaccination—is not the failure of scientists or science communicators to speak clearly or the inability of ordinary citizens to understand what they are saying. Rather, the source of such conflict is the proliferation of *antagonistic cultural meanings*. When such associations become attached to particular facts that admit of scientific investigation, these meanings are a kind of pollution of the science communication environment that disables the faculties ordinary citizens use to reliably absorb collective knowledge from their everyday interactions. The quality of the *science communication environment* is thus as critical for enlightened self-government as the quality of the natural environment is for the physical health and well-being of a society's members. Understanding how this science communication environment works, fashioning procedures to prevent it from becoming contaminated with antagonistic meanings, and formulating effective interventions to detoxify it when protective strategies fail—those are the most critical functions science communication can perform in a democratic society.