Podcast interview: Jim Jensen

**SA:** I’m Sola Biu and welcome to Science Sessions. Have you ever wondered how scientific research shapes public policy? When Congress needs in-depth scientific analysis to aid in policy-making, members turn to the National Academies and similar independent organizations. It takes an individual with expertise in both industries to translate highly technical scientific findings into something that can be easily understood by a congressional audience without a scientific background. This is where Jim Jensen comes in. Jensen has been the Executive Director of the Office of Congressional and Government Affairs at the National Academies for over 15 years. I spoke with Jensen about his background and how he got started in this particular field.

**JJ:** I was employed by a congressman from California who was a chairman of a subcommittee on science in the House of Representatives. He was defeated for his re-election in 1980 and the new subcommittee chairman was a guy named Al Gore. While working for Mr. Gore, I handled his issues concerning climate and I also covered him on a lot of issues concerning space policy, technology policy, etc. I transitioned from there after 1988 and did a brief fellowship at The National Center for Atmospheric Research, and then was asked to go to The Office of Technology Assessment. OTA, as it was called, was an in-house think-tank for Congress on science and technology issues, and my job there was I was the go-between between OTA and the Congress.

In 1995, it was decided to close OTA. I was asked to come over to the Academies and I’ve been here ever since. I’m fond of saying when I worked on the Hill it was my job to decode scientists for politicians, and now I do the inverse.

**SA:** In addition to distributing National Research Council reports on Capitol Hill and negotiating legislative requests to the National Academies, the Office of Congressional and Government Affairs informs Congress of public policy implications of science and technology.

**JJ:** Our mission is to make sure that all the entities in Congress are aware of the scholarship and the analysis we do here so they can use it in their policy deliberations. We organize all kinds of methods and means of trying to make sure they’re aware of our work. We conduct 175 briefings every year for Congress on a range of our reports, so it’s my job to make sure that as people think of tasks that they’d like the Academies to undertake, that that process goes smoothly as well.

The staff totals four, including myself, so I like to say we’re lean and mean. I’m fond of this job in part because there’s a regrettable cultural gap, I believe, between the political community in Washington and the scientific and engineering and research community in this country. One of the jobs of the Academy overall is to bridge that gap.

**SA:** Jensen also touched on the current relationship between the scientific community and Congress.
JJ: Congress and the policy machinery in Washington actually have a very high opinion of science and how it works. They believe, I think, that most scientists are altruistic, that they’re fairly objective, and that they believe as a matter of course that science is good for our national security. They fund it replete ly and have been funding it since World War II. But, they don’t understand very much about how it operates.  

And then from the scientific point of view, there’s something about the way we train scientists in that they wind up being unfortunately quite ignorant about how politics and policy are made. And this is most unfortunate because there needs to be a vibrant relationship between the two communities. More and more public policy is based on science and technology considerations, and we need people in government that are skilled in that. And in fact I often joke that it’s a horse race between the scientific illiteracy of the political community in Washington or the political illiteracy of the scientific community. It’s hard to tell the difference sometimes.  

SA: So, exactly how does a member of the general public find out more about current reports disseminating from the Office of Congressional and Government Affairs? According to Jensen, it’s simple.  

JJ: The most direct way of keeping yourself abreast of our various projects is to go to NationalAcademies.org. On the left-hand side you’ll find a series of hyperlinks—one is called “Current Projects.” All of our 500 odd ongoing projects are on that site. You can bookmark it and have an ongoing update of all the activities related to any project that you want. It also includes the name and contact information for the staff officers there, and the committee members, and you can keep yourself just as far abreast as you like of any project that way.