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A Farewell to Balance: How Journalism Shapes the Public Debate on Climate Change in the U.S.



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If you have a basic understanding of the science and politics related to climate change, do not read the following paragraph—most of it will sound self-evident! Yet, given the way climate change is often debated in the media, the following statements could be a useful template for a preamble for anyone contributing to this debate:

Human-induced climate change is—according to the world’s leading scientists—an established fact; it is not a matter of belief or debate.[1] Furthermore, there is broad agreement that climate change poses severe risks to humans and the ecosystem and that a radical reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is necessary in order to contain the process of global warming. Scientific models, however, will never fully reflect the complexities of the global climate system, including the natural variations that interact with human-induced global warming. Thus, climate science, its models, and its projections entail a certain degree of uncertainty. Forecasts and reality of tomorrow’s climate are bound to diverge, but this does not challenge the broad evidence available for both ongoing harm inflicted and future risks imposed by global warming.

The typical media debate tends to ignore or confuse both the broad knowledge accumulated *and* the limits of scientific models, instead either arguing the quality of the science to support conclusions or raising expectations of science that models cannot deliver. This is happening in a media sphere of ever-greater polarization around extreme political ideologies in which climate change has joined gun control, abortion, and same-sex marriage as ideologically-driven flashpoint issues.

Yet, it might not be too late to reverse this process and uphold the vision of a public sphere as developing understanding through communication and thus establishing a common ground for political action. For the issue of climate change, seeking such common ground seems particularly pressing. This essay focuses on the climate debate in the U.S. as this is not only a domestic debate, but has global repercussions. As Thomas Friedman stated, rather boldly, in a recent [New York Times editorial](#): “When it comes to dealing with the world’s climate and energy challenges I have a simple rule: change America, change the world.”

More specifically, this essay will focus on the role that journalism plays in the climate debate and discuss whether increasing online communication is likely to enable climate journalism to regain its balance. The outlook is ambivalent: New forms of online journalism provide access to more diverse views and a deeper analysis of climate change. However, they do not necessarily enhance the chances for constructive dialogue that bridges the different camps in the climate debate. On the one

hand, journalists may still be unwittingly contributing to public confusion and polarization of the debate by providing too much space for climate change denial and not enough room for a sober debate on different positions among those actors with an interest in tackling—rather than downplaying—the climate problem. On the other hand, journalism may also be in a good position to move the debate from confronting fringe positions toward developing a more constructive dialogue.

False Balance: Disproportionate Attention for Climate Change Skeptics

Experts label the traditional pattern of media coverage of climate change as a “false balance.” By pitting voices who represent the views of a broad majority of climate scientists against fringe views often articulated by actors without expertise in climate research, journalists create the illusion of balanced coverage while in effect providing disproportionate room for climate change denial.[2]

This is exactly what happened in a recent [CNN Crossfire](#) show: In response to the publication of the third National Climate Assessment,[3] CNN produced a debate between Bill Nye (a popular science educator and host of the 1990s TV show “The Science Guy”) and Nicolas Loris (an economist at the Heritage Foundation). Thus, CNN created a “denier versus warner” debate and provided a forum to the representative of an organization that has been identified as one of the big players in the organized attempt to downplay the risks associated with anthropogenic climate change.[4]

Where reporters with a basic background knowledge of science are involved, e.g., on the science pages of the elite press, this type of falsely balanced reporting has mostly been abandoned.[5] Climate change denial persists, however, on the opinion pages of elite newspapers, particularly in the *Wall Street Journal*, but also in the *Washington Post*. While most columnists have no expertise in (climate) science and do not go into specifics, the occasional questioning of climate science fits into the wider ideological narratives articulated in their columns. This kind of debate is the opposite of news, as it is neither new nor relevant. It has lost touch with the questions actually debated in climate science and does not address the relevant political question, namely: what we should do about the changing climate?

How the Skeptics Get into the News

Certain factors in both the political and the media spheres have contributed to the public debate’s false balance. First, studies of public relations activities and lobbying have revealed that climate change denial is part of a campaign driven by political and economic interests that are challenged by the need to reduce carbon emissions.[6] Professional PR has succeeded in marrying climate change denial with conservative and Christian values—quite an achievement as Christianity and denial of climate change are strange bedfellows (the preservation of God’s creation by fighting global warming is arguably a very Christian cause). Only very recently have voices like climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe become more vocal, pointing out that there is no contradiction between being a Christian and acknowledging the science of climate change.

Second, on the individual level, climate change denial can be understood as an “identity protective cognition,”[7] where admitting to the risks associated with climate change might lead to the conclusion that we need to change the ways we produce and consume goods. Denial of the necessity to take action both as an individual and as a society is thus the most convenient way to avoid dealing with climate change.

In addition to these individual and societal factors, a second set of determinants related to journalistic routines and media logic exists. How does journalism contribute to the climate debate and what changes occur in the digital media environment?

Going back to the *CNN Crossfire* example, it is important to clarify further why news organizations provide a public forum for the denial of well-established scientific findings. Do journalists doubt climate science and invite like-minded voices on their TV shows? Have journalists conspired to mislead the public on climate change? The answer to both questions is no.

A recent survey of journalists in different types of media outlets in five countries (United States, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, and India) found that across different countries and professional backgrounds, journalists who routinely cover climate change share the basic scientific consensus as established in the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): Across countries, journalists also understand that most of the vocal climate skeptics do not have much credibility as experts on climate change. Yet, while not being skeptics themselves, journalists advocate for including skeptics in their coverage. Journalists also say there is a need to properly contextualize and critically assess quotes from climate skeptics.

These findings reflect the power of two professional norms in journalism: first, the norm of balance that asks to give different voices a forum and second, the ideal of interpretive journalism that provides the necessary context and background information so that audiences can come to informed political choices.

The norm of balance originates in political reporting in the U.S. context of a two party system; consequently, political issues in the U.S. are presented by quoting voices from the Democrats and the Republicans. Editors, often with a background in political reporting, inflict this kind of reporting on science reporters. Yet, the question whether, for example, extreme weather events are more likely to occur in the future is not a political question. It is about the validity of scientific projections and not about values.^[8]

Therefore, concerning science issues, researchers have advocated to replace the norm of balanced reporting by the idea of “weight-of-evidence reporting,”^[9] which requires determining whether there is disagreement among the relevant experts and where the bulk of the scientific evidence lies. This entails identifying the relevant experts and being able to evaluate their expertise. To do so, journalists themselves need a certain degree of knowledge about the science and the actors involved. Specialization and time for research are resources that are increasingly scarce in times of job-cutting in journalism and the 24-hour news cycle.

Yet, putting these normative reflections about what would constitute good science reporting aside, the logic of commercial media promotes the kind of bi-polar debate between “warners” and “skeptics” on climate change. The “warner versus skeptic” scenario provides for conflict, and thus entertainment, broader audience attention, and easy-to-follow television. It also puts the journalist in the comfortable position of being the “objective” moderator. He or she cannot be accused of taking sides—although, in fact, journalists do take sides by inviting certain guests and setting the agenda of the debate.

Also, while climate journalists say that they want to provide the necessary context when reporting about climate change and dealing with skeptical voices, journalists may not always do so in practice.^[10] A lack of contextualization is one of the main criticisms advanced against journalism's treatment of climate change.^[11] Observers of media coverage find “unexplained flip-flops”^[12] that leave the audience without context: One week the science reporter discusses a study that finds glaciers are melting faster than expected; the next week, a reporter files a story that glaciers are melting *slower* than expected. Journalists do so because they may lack the expertise to evaluate the contribution of a single study against the findings of other studies. They may also be looking for a new angle rather than saying: The new report confirms what other reports have claimed before. Therefore, some detail might be singled out to create conflict and an interesting story and might entertain but also confuse the audience. Science journalists with high expertise in climate coverage may furthermore assume certain facts are general knowledge for the public, and omit seemingly unnecessary background information from their reporting. Finally, providing interpretation and context may expose journalists to accusations of bias and loss of objectivity if they explicitly disagree with, object to, or doubt the credibility of their interviewee. This would also raise the question why a person without credibility concerning the questions at hand was chosen as interview partner in the first place.

In the old media environment, journalists were prone to give in to the fallacies of false balance or of

reporting without providing the necessary context on climate change. This has been changing recently, especially among those reporters who have enough expertise both to provide context and to exclude not credible sources. Yet, the number of these specialized reporters is decreasing and expertise is lost in times of job cuts in the traditional media outlets.[13]

Climate Journalism Online: New Players, New Challenges

Today, the internet rivals television and newspapers as a source for scientific information.[14] New providers of climate news and commentary have emerged online, with Pulitzer Prize-winning outlets like *Inside Climate News* and the *Huffington Post* active in climate communication. The *New York Times* had for some years outsourced a substantial part of its online climate reporting to *Climate Wire*, a highly specialized subscription-based online news service. The online platform *Mashable*, with otherwise relatively modest newsroom resources, affords its own “Senior Climate Reporter” and has employed Andrew Freedman, one of the most prolific climate writers, for this job.

In order to identify the most important providers of climate change news and commentary in the online sphere, both an analysis of clear Google search results (with all personalization mechanisms disabled) and a survey among leading experts on climate change communication was conducted. The analysis of the Google hits counted only those outlets that actually provide updated news or commentary on climate change. The analysis covered search results in the U.S. on ten days spread over April and May 2014. The top six hits were:

The New York Times

National Geographic

Union of Concerned Scientists

AP (distributed through a number of different websites)

Skeptical Science

The Guardian

The Google search algorithm, at least with regard to searching for “climate change,” favors traditional media and PR sites of environmental or science organizations. Google users do not benefit from finding the more specialized outlets at the top of their search results. Also, skeptics’ blogs do not rank as highly in Google as might be expected: *Skeptical Science*, despite its name, is a blog devoted to dispute myths propagated by contrarian PR.

In a second attempt to explore the online debate on climate change, interviews with thirteen leading experts on climate change communication (researchers, climate journalists, and activists focused on climate communication) were conducted. Experts mention the following outlets as their most important online sources:

New York Times / Dot Earth Blog

Climate Central

Climate Progress

Climate Wire

Daily Climate

Real Climate

Looking at the organizational background of the different outlets listed above, it is interesting to note that the climate communication experts interviewed for this study do not rely on traditional media;

some even say they do not read any newspaper at all, but prefer new kinds of specialized outlets.

Four features can be identified that distinguish the online world from offline journalism on climate change:

First, scientists become more important as communicators through their own blogs (*Real Climate*), with the help of the increasingly professional PR of their own organizations (such as the website of NASA, which is also ranked highly on Google), in hybrid journalist-scientific outlets (*Climate Central*) or as contributors of extended quotes on blogs convened by professional journalists (the *Dot Earth* blog hosted on the *New York Times* website).

Second, journalism itself becomes more *immersed in science*. The *Climate Wire* reporters can specialize in climate change in a way that would have been unthinkable for a newspaper's science reporters. Andrew Revkin, author of the *Dot Earth* blog, has been labelled a "knowledge journalist,"^[15] a type of highly specialized journalist who engages with scientists, takes part in their conferences, and goes "up-stream" in the process of science communication,^[16] thus not only reporting results from scientific studies but also inquiring about how scientific findings are generated.

Third, a model of *distributed and networked journalism* goes way beyond the traditional idea of news agency material being distributed to different outlets. Obvious indicators of networked journalism are frequent links to other information sources (linking to external websites still is very rare on the sites of traditional news outlets) and high numbers of followers and retweets on Twitter. The prototype of networked journalism is *Climate Desk*: four journalists from *Climate Desk* reach hundreds of millions of users through the distribution of their articles to influential news sites like *Mother Jones*, *The Guardian*, and the *Huffington Post*. It is notable that these outlets also share a common political perspective: a left-of-center outlook on climate change policy.

This leads to a fourth feature of the online debate: hybrid forms of *journalism mixing with different degrees and types of advocacy*. On one end, there are pure advocacy organizations such as Greenpeace, who employ former journalists to deliver online "news" on climate change (and other issues). On the other end, there are independent media organizations such as the *Huffington Post* and *Mother Jones*, as well as the blogs of the *Guardian*, all of which clearly display a certain element of environmental advocacy in their coverage, at least in the eyes of many communication experts interviewed for this study. Finally, there are hybrid organizations like *Climate Progress*, widely regarded as an important source of news and commentary on climate change and an opinion leader online with a strong political agenda. Its leading personnel are linked to the Democratic Party and funding stems from the progressive *Center for American Progress*. Another role that some observers attach to *Climate Progress* is that of "policing climate coverage" by engaging in sometimes aggressive personal attacks directed at climate journalists and other actors in the debate on climate change. While the blame for starting the aggressive war of words on climate change clearly lies with climate-skeptic blogs such as *Climate Depot*, their style of communication has become contagious and seems to be met in part by equally aggressive attacks from the other side of the political spectrum.

Transparency, Rather than Objectivity?

This growing segment of politicized journalism diverges from the traditional U.S. model of the journalist as a distant observer and rather represents a model that journalists have traditionally played in Europe: with a clear political line attached to different news outlets, such as the conservative *Daily Telegraph* as opposed to the liberal *Guardian* or the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as opposed to the more progressive *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Researchers of media systems call this "political parallelism"^[17] and U.S. journalism is clearly Europeanizing, especially in the online sphere.

This may not be the worst thing that can happen to journalism if the "bias" is clearly stated, e.g., in the [editorial mission](#) of *Mother Jones*, one of the outlets with a lot of coverage of climate change: "[...] we're not insulted by being called left, liberal, progressive, whatever. [...] Political inclinations

notwithstanding, we will cheerfully investigate any people or entities of any political persuasion, right, left, or center, if their behavior warrants it.” The first part of this statement provides transparency, the second part identifies it as a *journalistic* outlet. Fair and critical reporting needs to be applied to all actors equally. Likewise, the *Huffington Post* clearly identifies the organizational affiliation of its external bloggers, many of whom are environmental activists.

This is in line with the statement by David Weinberger who blogged: “Transparency is the new objectivity.”^[18] While the two concepts seem to be overlapping only to a certain degree, at the very least, it seems fair to state that an explicit bias is preferable to a hidden agenda as the readers are provided with the necessary context to make up their minds.

Thus, the new breed of online news outlets can hardly be criticized for continuing the old mistakes of false balance and lack of contextualization; they provide interpretation and complement the debate about climate change with a debate about climate communication. This meta-discourse is vividly pursued on many platforms mentioned above. It clearly spells out the failures of traditional journalism with regards to covering climate change and exposes contrarian PR and lobbying activities: *Mother Jones*, for example, published a piece about the *CNN Crossfire* debate mentioned above and outlets such as *Inside Climate News* as well as *Skeptical Science* focus on providing responses to the claims of contrarians. Thus, the online sphere provides spaces for reflection about how climate change is communicated in public. Journalism has regained its balance insofar as advocacy from contrarian websites is now met with advocacy from actors that acknowledge climate science.

The online sphere provides new forms of journalism and multiple chances to dive deep into the political and scientific debate on climate change. Yet, the online debate aggravated rather than solved the problem of an ever more polarized debate on climate change. As web users have ample opportunity to remain within their own filter bubble of information and commentary affirming their world views, advocacy journalists run the risks of only “preaching to the choir” of those already convinced. This is aggravated by the personalization mechanisms used by Google that many search engine users are not even aware of. Like-minded journalists and audiences may get into a dynamic of ever stronger mutual affirmation and polarization of their world views: A recent study shows how partisan media content contributes to the polarization of audiences as its effect is strongest on those audience members who are able to affirm their already firmly-held opinions.^[19] Advocacy journalism therefore needs to be complemented by the more traditional type of journalistic outlet that sees itself as a relatively neutral platform with straight reporting and a diversity of different voices contributing opinion pieces.

The audience may be more receptive to new ideas and different world views if climate change communicators would try to become less aggressive toward other views. The challenge is to bring civility and respect back to the debate and to talk to each other. Yet, it makes no sense to try to involve everyone, even the professional climate deniers. As Upton Sinclair put it: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it.” But it makes a lot of sense to distinguish between professional denial and other kinds of criticism toward climate science and policy. It makes sense to focus on the range of opinions between the fringes. As in foreign policy, it makes sense to talk to the moderate actors on the other side of the conflict even if you do not share their values and ideas.

For online journalists this demands an exercise in self-restraint. Sober debates may be less captivating for broad audiences than juicy clashes of extreme ideologies. Yet, it might also be more interesting for both journalists and audiences to look for new voices to quote on climate change, voices that are less extreme, but also less predictable, voices that might even say something thought-provoking. The online environment provides all the tools for linking and retweeting across ideologies. A culture of digital dialogue on climate change may still evolve and fill the intellectual void that the outdated and falsely-balanced debate on climate change has left.

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