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Sciences, Publics, Politics

The Trouble With Climate Emergency Journalism

To avoid climate change catastrophe, the world must rapidly transform its economy away from fossil fuels. But to achieve this historically unprecedented task, the news industry must also transform, urged the organizers of a town hall meeting at Columbia University's School of Journalism, held on April 30, 2019. The meeting marked the start of Covering Climate Now, a multiyear initiative led by the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR) and *The Nation*, in partnership with *The Guardian*, to create what they call a "new playbook for journalism that's compatible with the 1.5-degree future that scientists say must be achieved." Among the panelists at the event were journalists, including Bill McKibben, Naomi Klein, Katrina vanden Heuvel, and Chris Hayes, who regularly contribute to the cosponsors' publications.

So urgent is the challenge of decarbonizing the world's economy, almost nothing else matters in comparison, argued town hall co-organizers Mark Hertsgaard and Kyle Pope in a *Nation* cover story outlining their vision for the initiative. "The US news media, to their great discredit, have played a big part in getting it wrong for many years," they wrote. But now journalists "need to remember their Paul Revere responsibilities—to awaken, inform, and rouse the people to action."

As a model for TV journalism, Hertsgaard and Pope pointed to a recent hour-long MSNBC program devoted entirely to the Green New Deal, in which Hayes, the show's host, explained the details of the plan; interviewed its cosponsor Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) before a live audience; and led a panel discussion of experts who

focused on the importance of covering the climate justice story to connect the climate crisis with broader audiences.

For legacy print publications, coverage at *The Guardian* sets the standard, according to Hertsgaard and Pope, with nine full-time reporters and editors dedicated to climate change. A few weeks after the Columbia event, *The Guardian* issued a memo upping its commitment to the topic, detailing changes to its official style guide that "more accurately describe the environmental crises facing the world." Climate change as a term is too passive and gentle, said the paper's editor-in-chief, Katharine Viner, "when what scientists are talking about is catastrophe for humanity." Moving ahead, climate change would be referred to exclusively as the "climate emergency, crisis, or breakdown." Similarly, global warming would be referred to as "global heating," and "climate sceptic" would be replaced by "climate science denier."

At the close of the town hall, the former PBS broadcaster Bill Moyers announced that the Schumann Media Center, a philanthropy that he leads, would provide \$1 million to the Columbia School of Journalism to finance the first year of the project. He urged the journalists assembled to cover the climate crisis in the manner of Edward R. Murrow, who at the start of World War II defied his CBS News bosses by reporting on the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany, breaking US media silence about the existential threat of fascism. Like Murrow, journalists must not only document the truth of the climate crisis but also "report on the madness ... of a US government that scorns reality as fake news, denies

the truths of nature, and embraces a theocratic ideology that welcomes catastrophe as a sign of the returning Messiah,” Moyers argued.

As a first step, the organizers of the Covering Climate Now initiative are calling on news organizations to dedicate a full week of coverage to climate change leading up to a fall 2019 United Nations summit in New York City. They also plan future meetings, deep verticals devoted to climate journalism at *CJR* and *The Nation* websites, and “how-to” guides and rapid response teams to aid newsrooms in covering extreme weather events and similar topics.

Overlooked biases

Climate change is an important and complex story, and news organizations will need help in producing sustained, quality coverage. But the Covering Climate Now initiative is off to a troubling start. Conspicuously absent from the kickoff event were respected veteran journalists and scholars who offer a very different account of the challenges facing climate change journalism today, and the corrections needed if society is going to make better decisions, trust experts and the news media, and avoid damaging groupthink. Organizers say they want to hear from a wide range of stakeholders on what is needed. So far, they seem more interested in uniform messaging.

Rather than address longstanding biases in environmental reporting and the role that experts and advocates might play in enabling such flaws, Hertsgaard and Pope argue that the main problem with journalism today is overwhelmingly structural, as news managers tend to be older, white men of privilege who have “failed to see the climate crisis as fundamental and all encompassing, and worthy of attention from every journalist on their payroll.” Yet even in the face of significant cuts in news budgets and staff layoffs over the past few years, the sheer volume of climate change coverage produced by US opinion-leading newspapers remains remarkable and is on the upswing. Since 2016, the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *Los Angeles Times* have produced between 204 to 643 climate change-related articles per month, or 7 to 21 articles per day, according to tracking led by Max Boykoff of the University of Colorado Boulder—figures that do not include the significant number of online-only articles at the *Times* and *Post*, or articles by wire services.

In contrast, other analyses show that national TV news and cable news networks, with their focus on breaking political events, personality clashes, and election races, continue to give little airtime to climate change. Media scholars recognize that the lack of TV news attention remains a problem, and even more troubling are portrayals at Fox News and online outlets such as *Breitbart News*,

which routinely deny the reality of human-caused climate change.

But at the opinion-leading legacy print publications such as *The Guardian* or *Washington Post*, and at newer digital-native outlets such as *HuffPost* (formerly *The Huffington Post*) or *Buzzfeed*, the challenge in most instances is not the amount of coverage but how the risks and solutions to climate change are characterized. Studies conducted by social scientists in the United States and Europe using statistical techniques to rigorously evaluate hundreds of news stories show that journalists frequently gloss over the uncertainties and caveats inherent in a single study or line of climate change research, neglect to report on the varying predictions offered by different climate models, and fail to include in their reporting the careful language that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has developed to qualify the likelihood of various consequences of climate change. In coverage of major climate change-related events such as a new IPCC report or United Nations summit, journalists also tend to dramatize their significance by emphasizing the most calamitous future climate change scenarios, framing a new scientific report’s findings in terms of disastrous and fear-inducing risks, rather than emphasizing in the face of those risks opportunities to protect health or sustainably grow economies. Reviewing available studies, the German journalism researcher Michael Bruggeman concludes that reporting too often “simplifies science and turns context-dependent and preliminary findings into established facts.”

Headlines reporting on the 2018 IPCC report verged on dystopian. “Major climate report describes a strong risk of crisis as early as 2040,” warned the *New York Times*. “The world has just over a decade to get climate change under control, UN scientists say,” echoed the *Washington Post*. “We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe,” predicted *The Guardian*. “New UN Climate Report Dims Hope for Averting Catastrophic Global Warming,” declared *HuffPost*. “UN Says Climate Genocide Is Coming. It’s Actually Worse Than That,” was the headline at *New York* magazine.

Hot takes

These findings support longstanding concerns voiced by the veteran environmental writer and former *New York Times* journalist Andrew Revkin, who has cautioned that too many of his peers write stories about the most calamitous scientific studies featuring the “hottest,” most dramatic conclusions, while ignoring other research of similar quality that emphasizes the uncertainty of such risks. For example, studies concluding that climate change is contributing to extreme weather and natural disasters generate widespread journalistic attention, but when studies by equally well-qualified scientists suggest

that global warming may have had at most a minimal impact on such events, they generate far fewer stories. For years, Revkin argues, similar dynamics have played out in coverage of high-profile topics such as melting snowpacks and glaciers, the timeline and severity of sea level rise, and the dangers posed by shifts in the Atlantic Ocean's warm circulation pattern.

This cycle of hype is not unique to climate science. Under immense pressure to demonstrate societal benefits for their publicly funded research, and at times motivated by politics, scientists and their institutions sometimes engage in over-promising in grant proposals and over-selling in research articles and news releases, avoiding discussion of uncertainty with the press. Journalists, at times motivated by their own political inclinations, further twist publicity efforts on behalf of new studies to add drama, gain attention, and spread across social media.

Historically, environmental reporters have tended to take a less critical stance regarding the arguments of green groups and activists than political, general assignment, and business journalists who may only write occasionally about climate change and energy. This pattern, of course, is consistent with a general tendency among journalists on any beat to adopt the perspective of their key sources. But the tendency of environmental reporting to echo the perspective of climate change activists also has its origin in a view shared by many environmental journalists about the need to counterbalance a perceived public relations advantage held by the fossil fuel industry, write the University of Montreal's Éric Montpetit and Alexandre Harvey in a recent study published in the journal *Environmental Communication* (where I serve as editor).

These "counterbalancing" storylines in turn influence how other journalists cover the same topics. In the context of breaking events or emerging issues, such as a disaster or new IPCC report, journalists covering those stories may find that mirroring the angles and frames of reference used by the most experienced environmental journalists is both professionally safe and time saving. Climate activists and political leaders then amplify the cycle of hype by using the narratives emanating from science and the media as further grist for their messaging mill.

The ubiquity of worse-case scenario narratives in the news and via social media, in turn, enables political leaders and activists to claim that we have no time for compromise since such efforts run up against the laws of physics. These claims then trigger fresh news attention and social media discussion. "Millennials and people, you know, Gen Z and all these folks that will come after us are looking up and we're like, 'The world is going to

end in 12 years if we don't address climate change and your biggest issue is how are we gonna pay for it?'" Rep. Ocasio-Cortez said earlier this year, referring to those who had raised questions about the Green New Deal. "This is the war—this is our World War II."

To protect preferred narratives about climate change and its solutions, a main strategy by some activist scientists and writers has been to discredit experts who question these worse-case scenario narratives or the related advocated policies by labeling them "deniers," "delayers," "contrarians," "confusionists," and "lukewarmers," as the journalist Keith Kloor has documented. These attacks are not so much about the specifics of climate science or policy, but instead about controlling who has the authority to speak on the subject. Such labeling comports well with the political mood of the day: it breeds incivility and cultivates a discourse culture where protecting one's own identity, group, and preferred storyline takes priority over constructive consideration of knowledge and evidence.

To their credit, Hertsgaard and Pope encourage journalists to focus on coverage of solutions, but the only solution they argue for is the Green New Deal, which they call "a response that is commensurate with the scale and urgency of the problem." They also emphasize that journalists need to study up on climate science, but among the four books that they recommend are Naomi Klein's forthcoming *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal* and Bill McKibben's recent *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*—political calls to action that do little to explain the complexity of climate science and policy. McKibben's *Falter* does not even directly cite a single scientific study, relying exclusively on references at the back of the book to news reports about their findings, rather than the original studies (thus demonstrating the sheer volume of climate reporting available today).

Revkin offers a contrasting approach to climate change journalism. He often refers to a figure that displays different distributions or "curves" of expert knowledge relative to climate change: "When you get more specific," he says, "you can see that the level of confidence and range of views on each aspect of greenhouse-driven climate change, from the basic physics onward, has a different 'shape.'" There is a "clear cut" convergence among experts that more carbon dioxide equals a warming world, as he explains, but on specific impacts such as increasing the intensity of hurricanes or the pace of sea level rise, or on the efficacy of policy proposals such as the Green New Deal, there is a much broader distribution of expert opinion. That range of opinion, he argues, should be reflected in news reporting.

Climate in context

To understand why differences in reporting style matter, consider how Hertsgaard covered a 2015 study led by the climate scientist James Hansen in an article that he wrote for *The Daily Beast*, compared with how Revkin covered the study at his *New York Times* blog *Dot Earth*. Released in the months leading up to the Paris climate treaty meetings, Hansen and his 16 coauthors warned that based on their complex computer modeling, polar ice sheets were likely to melt at a far faster rate than previously estimated. Within a few decades, he wrote, coastal cities from Boston to Shanghai could be under water, risking military conflict, mass migration, and economic collapse that “might make the planet ungovernable, threatening the fabric of civilization.”

Hansen’s study had been submitted to a journal where the open-access peer review process takes place over a period of months as experts are asked to read the paper and post substantive online comments. Only after reviewing the amassed expert comments and the authors’ replies do the editors decide whether the paper will be accepted for formal publication. But even before the paper was posted for online review, Hansen worked with a public relations firm to distribute it to journalists, after which he held a telephone press conference where reporters could ask questions. His goal, he told reporters, was to influence the outcome of the Paris climate negotiations.

“Climate Seer James Hansen Issues His Direst Forecast Yet,” was the over-the-top headline of Hertsgaard’s *Daily Beast* article that followed the press conference. If true, the implications of Hansen’s findings are “vast and profound,” he wrote. The “blockbuster study” and its “apocalyptic scenario” presents a “huge headache for diplomats,” exploding the all too modest goals of climate diplomacy, Hertsgaard told readers.

Journalists at the *New York Times* science desk, the Associated Press, the BBC, and *The Guardian* were among those who chose not to cover the paper, judging it premature to run a story before peer review had begun. Revkin at his *Dot Earth* blog chose an alternative strategy. In a blog post titled “Whiplash Warning When Climate Science is Publicized Before Peer Review,” Revkin analyzed the authors’ apparent motivations, explaining to readers Hansen’s career arc as “climatologist-turned-campaigner.” Revkin identified key differences between arguments in the online discussion paper posted at the journal and the supporting materials supplied to journalists, which included claims that dramatic sea level rise was “likely to occur this century.” He also posted replies to emails

he had sent requesting reactions to the paper from leading climatologists, many of which were critical of the assumptions used by Hansen and his colleagues.

Rather than portray science and scientists as truth’s ultimate custodians, journalists such as Revkin reveal for readers how climate science really works, probing the variety of social and political factors that shape the production of expert knowledge. Just as peer-review and other established norms within climate science serve as partial correctives to mistakes, bias, or conflicts of interest, journalists working in the mold of Revkin perform a similarly vital and complementary function. When journalists fail to represent a range of expert opinion on these complex topics, or to investigate scientists’ own biases, motives, and practices in promoting their research results and policy preferences, they risk allowing themselves to be captured by a narrow ideological perspective, doing further damage to waning trust in the news media. In a recent paper with my colleague Declan Fahy, we argue that this style of critically oriented science reporting is what is needed to help maintain public faith in climate science and journalism.

The main challenge for a new generation of climate change journalists is not to turn up the threat level on behalf of the Green New Deal, but to identify for their audience the flaws in conventional narratives about climate change, holding all sides accountable for their claims and actions. We will not solve climate change; it is a chronic societal condition that we will do better or worse at managing over the century and beyond. Journalists have a vital role to play, contextualizing expert knowledge and competing claims, promoting consideration of a broader menu of policy options and technologies, and facilitating discussion that bridges entrenched tribal divisions. But to achieve this alternative vision for where journalism needs to go, the new Covering Climate Now initiative must strongly challenge longstanding biases in environmental reporting, rather than reinforcing them. The project is shaping up to become an echo chamber for climate change activism, just another symptom of today’s bitter political culture. What if, instead, it focused on assuring the integrity and independence of journalists covering the most difficult and defining challenge of our generation?

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