

Climate Deniers' Strategy of Confusion

The fossil-fuel industry has invested billions of dollars in propaganda funding phony "scientists" and bankrolling politicians to confuse the public about the threat from global warming. The deception is aided and abetted by the mainstream media's misguided "balance," as Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang explain.

By Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang

Half a century ago, the tobacco industry tried to preserve its market by misleading Americans about the scientific validity of research demonstrating that smoking causes cancer. To weaken efforts to fight global warming, the "climate change denial machine," in the words of the Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society, has been using that same strategy. For more than 20 years it has sought to cast doubt on the science that demonstrates that the climate is changing and pollution is to blame.

The Los Angeles Times has announced that it will no longer print letters to the editor that state "there's no sign humans have caused climate change," because they are factually inaccurate. Now, it is time for reporters and editors across the country to follow suit. To avoid misleading readers with a false "balance," they should also stop paying attention to the deniers.

The denial lobby is using pseudo-science and cherry-picked data to present the fringe view that global warming is nothing more than what Sen. James M. Inhofe, Republican of Oklahoma, famously called "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people."

Just last month it reprised its tired, and false, arguments to debunk the premier scientific assessment of global warming, produced by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. On Sept. 27, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organization declared with near certainty that human activity is causing the climate to change. The panel's previous assessment, issued in 2007, was only slightly less certain, 90 percent versus the 95 percent in the new report. An overwhelming majority of climate scientists endorsed it.

In short, the global warming deniers are as wrong as the smoke-blowers who said in the 1960s that a pack a day was fine. No one seriously argues today that tobacco isn't bad for you, and if they did, no one would listen.

But the Marlboro Men of global warming still draw attention as they deny the consensus conclusion that burning fossil fuels in power plants, cars and factories is trapping heat in the atmosphere. They deny that this will raise sea

levels, bring more violent storms, and worsen droughts and heat waves. What are they smoking?

Do we have a dog in this fight? Absolutely. We just think the debate should be about fact, not fiction. We are not trying to muzzle those who disagree with us. There will be plenty to disagree about in deciding what actions to take. But it is time for journalists to ignore false and misleading statements that mask the source's bias and scam the public.

With the new attention that the I.P.C.C. report brings to the science of global warming, in coming weeks and months more than a few serious news reporters will be tempted in the name of "balance" to quote the deniers, journalists call them "skeptics" who have presented increasingly discredited messages: Global warming is not happening. Or if it is, it is not caused by carbon dioxide emissions or other human activity. Or, well, it won't have an impact, we'll be fine.

Who is saying what?

–Bob Carter, Heartland Institute: "Currently the planet is cooling." Wrong. The last decade (2000-2009) was the hottest on record; 2010 was the hottest year recorded.

–Fred Singer, Science and Environmental Policy Project: "Carbon dioxide is not a pollutant." Oh, yeah? Acting under U.S. Supreme Court direction, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found that CO₂ is a pollutant because of the harm it causes.

–Joseph Bast, Heartland Institute: "Most scientists do not believe human activities threaten to disrupt the Earth's climate." Misleading, to say the least: 97 percent of climate scientists agree that humans are causing global warming.

For those who write about global warming, spreading the pronouncements of fringe "skeptics" doesn't show balance. For those who read about global warming, it equates serious climate science and evaluation of peer-reviewed reports with the declarations of individuals, most lacking background in climate research, who are often funded by those standing to profit if the United States fails to curb carbon dioxide emissions.

Exxon, for example, gave \$2.8 million to the Heartland Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute alone from 1998 to 2012, according to corporate tax records cited in a Greenpeace report.

The attention paid to the deniers has real consequences. For one, it puts pressure on the I.P.C.C. to censor its conclusions. Climate "skeptics" have

vilified the U.N. panel, made up of several hundred of the world's leading climate scientists, subjecting them to "abusive language on blogs, comparisons to the Unabomber, e-mail hacking, and even occasional death threats," Justin Gillis wrote in The New York Times.

"Who could blame the panel if it wound up erring on the side of scientific conservatism," he wrote. The clear implication: The criticism could lead the panel to pull its punches when, he wrote, most would want "an unvarnished analysis" of global warming's risks.

More broadly, relying on the deniers to provide so-called "balance" also helps create political pressure that makes it all the more difficult to act against global warming. It fuels efforts in the House of Representatives to thwart sensible measures to fight climate change. A solid majority of House Republicans denies that global warming is even occurring, pointing to the alleged disagreements among scientists to justify siding with the fossil-fuel industry.

At a minimum, good journalism, and the readers' right to be fully informed requires identifying a source's stake. Is the source an environmentalist or coal or oil spokesperson? Their interests are clear.

But what about those claiming expertise or academic credentials in climate science who are supported by think tanks and front groups funded by oil, coal and others with a financial stake in the debate? The reader deserves to know their potential for bias.

Better yet, it's time to toss the denial machine into the bin of discredited ideas. It can keep Joe Camel company.

Dan Becker directed Sierra Club's Global Warming and Energy Program for 18 years before founding the Safe Climate Campaign, which advocates strong measures to fight global warming. James Gerstenzang is the campaign's editorial director. During four decades as a journalist, he covered the environment and the White House for the Los Angeles Times. [A version of this article previously appeared in USA Today.]
