

Global Warming Censored: How the Major Networks Silence the Debate on Climate Change

By [Julia A. Seymour](#) and [Dan Gainor](#)

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So much for that job requirement of balance and objectivity. When it came to global warming the media clearly left out dissent in favor of hype, cute penguins and disastrous predictions.

“They [penguins] are charismatic, endearing and in serious trouble,” warned NBC’s Anne Thompson on the Dec. 12, 2007, “Nightly News.” Thompson didn’t include any disagreement.

While the networks had plenty of time to worry about the future of birds, most network news shows didn’t take much time to include any other point of view even though hundreds of scientists have expressed skepticism of manmade climate change theory.

Another NBC reporter, Kerry Sanders, hyped the threat of warming to polar bears and walruses on Dec. 9, 2007, “a world scientists say may melt away by 2050.” Sanders didn’t include any scientists who disagreed with that claim.

The lack of balance on the issue prompted one network journalist, John Stossel of ABC, to do a story on the media’s one-sidedness on “20/20” Oct. 19, 2007.

“You’ve heard the reports. The globe is warming. And it’s our fault. And the consequences will be terrible. But you should know there is another side to this story,” teased Stossel as he began his “Give me a Break” segment.

There is another side to the issue. In one story, Stossel interviewed four scientists critical of the so-called “consensus” on global warming. That’s four more dissenting scientists than CBS put on its network in six entire months.

To better assess network behavior on this key topic, the Business & Media Institute examined 205 stories from ABC, CBS and NBC that mentioned “global warming” or “climate change” between July 1, 2007, and Dec. 31, 2007.

BMI found skepticism was shut out of a vast majority of reports. Overall, a measly 20 percent had any dissent at all referenced by a journalist or guest.

Skeptical voices were suppressed by the networks, outnumbered by nearly a 7-to-1 ratio by those promoting fear of climate change or being used by the network for the same purpose. CBS had an even worse record: nearly 38 proponents to one skeptic.

Lengthy segments like Scott Pelley's Oct. 21, 2007, "60 Minutes" story on "The Age of Megafires" certainly had time to include an alternative point of view to the notion that global warming is largely responsible for bigger, hotter fires in the American West. But Pelley skipped those voices - voices like a University of California Merced professor published on the Washington Spokesman-Review Web site about the California wildfires.

According to Alan Zarembo's Oct. 24, 2007, story, ["Scientists said it would be difficult to make that case, given the combustible mix of drought and wind that has plagued the region for centuries or more."](#)

Anthony Westerling, a UC-Merced professor and climate scientist, told Zarembo that the wildfires were the result of two "staples of the region's climatic history," meaning "strong Santa Ana winds" and "a drought that turned much of the hillsides to bone-dry kindling."

"Neither can be attributed to climate change," said Westerling.

The near blackout of skepticism on the networks didn't come as much of a surprise, since reporters like Pelley have been much more than onlookers in the story of global warming. In many cases they have become advocates - even going "to the ends of the earth" "to find evidence of climate change."

Ann Curry of NBC's "Today" made that clear on Oct. 29, 2007: "[O]ur mission, of course, is to find evidence of climate change."

When people with other views were mentioned, it sometimes came with a denigrating label like "deniers" or "cynics." Such critics were also portrayed as flat-earthers by journalists and guests. One person skeptical of manmade climate change, a Kentucky state representative, managed to get on the air but was treated to an exceptionally hostile interview by ABC's Bill Weir.

There were many other flaws in the reporting that created a very one-sided perspective. Journalists repeatedly phrased questions or made statements indicating human-caused warming was a fact, and they included opinions of politicians, movie stars, musicians and ordinary people like bankers instead of relying on scientists.

But according to Dr. Pat Michaels viewers would be better served by hearing both sides. "They would benefit from appreciating the true scientific diversity on the topic. The arguments against these gloom and doom global warming scenarios are much stronger than the arguments for them," Michaels told BMI.

Voices of Dissent: Missing

According to NBC's Brian Williams, "There's no shortage of folks out there saying it's [global warming is] not all that bad." Williams was teasing a "Nightly News" story on August 15 that included two other voices: Dr. Pat Michaels, a [research professor of environmental sciences](#), and Marlo Lewis, [senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute](#).

Williams was certainly right - there are hundreds of scientists from around the world who question the global warming "consensus" - but in the news the latter half of 2007 you had to look hard to find them.

On the three networks, 80 percent of stories (167 out of 205) didn't mention skepticism or anyone at all who dissented from global warming alarmism. CBS did the absolute worst job. Ninety-seven percent of its stories (34 out of 35) ignored other opinions. Williams' own network, NBC, came in a close second with 85 percent (76 out of 89) excluding skepticism. ABC was the most balanced network, but still censored dissent from 64 percent of its stories (34 out of 53).

But dissent flourishes. The U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works (EPW) Committee released a [list](#) on Dec. 20, 2007, of more than 400 skeptical scientists from different fields – astrophysics, geology, climatology, meteorology and others. The release didn't even earn a news brief from one of the three networks as of Dec. 31, 2007.

Even when one show claimed it would represent a range of opinions on the issue, it didn't. On Oct. 30, 2007, NBC "Today" co-host Matt Lauer teased the upcoming "Ends of the Earth" broadcasts saying to Meredith Vieira, "And you're going to be interviewing all the experts talking about the issues of climate change." (emphasis added)

Vieira replied, "Absolutely. Getting into a whole debate, too, because some people believe there's an effect of climate change, others say not really. So we're going to discuss all of it and give viewers at home real tips on what you can do."

But on Nov. 5 and 6, 2007 as "Today" went to the "Ends of the Earth," the only "experts" Vieira spoke to were former vice president Al Gore, Chip Giller of Grist.org – a left-wing environmental Web site – and Katherine Wroth, co-author of "Wake Up and Smell the Planet."

Grist is an extreme publication. David Roberts of the environmentalist magazine called for "[war crimes trials for these bastards – some sort of climate Nuremberg.](#)" referring to the climate change "[denial industry.](#)" (Roberts later [retracted](#) his comment, but not until it received a strongly negative response.)

The only skepticism of global warming "consensus" that came up was a brief mention by Vieira as she interviewed Gore. She asked Gore about John Christy, one scientist formerly with the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), who criticized Gore's predictions in an op-ed printed in The Wall Street Journal. Gore shot back calling Christy an "outlier."

Vieira didn't question Gore's remark or give Christy an opportunity to respond to the attack. Perhaps if she had, Christy would have echoed his remarks from the Nov. 1, 2007, [Wall Street Journal](#):

"I see neither the developing catastrophe nor the smoking gun proving that human activity is to blame for most of the warming we see. Rather, I see a reliance on climate models (useful but never 'proof') and the coincidence that change in carbon dioxide and global temperatures have loose similarity over time," said Christy.

He continued, "We [dissenting scientists] discount the possibility that everything is caused by human actions, because everything we've seen the climate do has happened before. Sea levels rise and fall continually. The Arctic ice cap has shrunk before. One millennium there are hippos swimming in the Thames, and a geological blink later there is an ice bridge linking Asia and North America."

‘Deniers,’ ‘Hired Guns’ and Hostile Interviews

Journalists practically drooled over Al Gore during Live Earth interviews and after he won the Nobel Peace Prize. In contrast, people with alternative views barely got face time on the networks. Instead, they received insults and hostile questions.

The ugliest treatment of a skeptic was by Bill Weir on Nov. 18, 2007, “Good Morning America.” He was interviewing Democratic state representative Bill Gooch from Kentucky.

Weir peppered Gooch with hardball questions and even attacked Gooch’s motives:

- “So what do you suspect these 4,000 or so scientists from 130 countries are up to? Do you accuse them [IPCC scientists] of lying? Do you think they’re just all wrong?”
- “I should point out that your family is in business with the coal industry. You opposed a bill that would’ve stopped coal mines from exploding the tops of mountains and dumping waste into rivers there. So shouldn’t you temper on your opinion on the environment?”

Gooch made it clear that he supported an open debate, saying, “[T]here is another side of the story. I think what we have is we have the problem of global warming about to become a political problem when lawmakers in Congress, when governors in states, when even the courts start to act in ways that are gonna affect the American people in severe ways.” Gooch then mentioned the possible \$6-trillion cost of one bill to deal with global warming.

“And what I wanna make sure that we do is that if we act, we have the science right,” explained Gooch.

Weir wasn’t satisfied: “But, but according to all these scientists, the more handwringing we do, the more we dither on this, the worse it’s going to get. And what if you’re wrong? What if this is, in fact, a global catastrophe? Isn’t it a moral imperative as a public servant to err on the side of planetary survival and get something done?”

Instead of letting Gooch debate with someone who disagreed, Weir filled that role himself. He came across as a passionate advocate for “something” that would supposedly aid “survival,” ignoring the cost, accuracy, and his supposed objectivity.

Journalists also called skeptics “deniers,” conjuring images of Holocaust deniers, and cast them as flat-earthers – ironically forgetting that there was once a scientific consensus that the earth was flat.

When Gore attacked [Dr. Christy](#) [who was mentioned by Meredith Vieira] on “Today” Nov. 5, 2007, Gore specifically compared people critical of anthropogenic (human-caused) global warming to people who think the Earth is flat.

“Well, he’s an outlier, he no longer belongs to the IPCC. And he is way outside the scientific consensus ... There are still people who believe that the Earth is flat,” said Gore.

Republican governor Arnold Schwarzenegger made the same disparaging comparison on July 16, 2007 “Early Show” on CBS. After co-host Harry Smith said, “[I] asked why some people still don’t believe we have a problem.”

“Well, I think that there is [sic] still a lot of people that still think that the world is flat,” said Schwarzenegger.

NBC’s chief environmental affairs correspondent Anne Thompson said, “He is proudly a denier,” of research professor and CATO senior fellow Dr. Pat Michaels.

Michaels told BMI, “She has no idea what she’s talking about. I have written and spoken repeatedly in the last 15 years that human beings are responsible for most of the warming in the past century.” What Michaels disagrees on is whether such warming will result in environmental catastrophe.

Recalling that NBC interview, Michaels continued, “The interview was great, but she pulled out one little piece and took it completely out of context. It was really, really disappointing. The interview was conducted in a very professional fashion, it was the editing that clearly did not reflect the tone and content of the overall interview.”

Thompson actually included two dissenting views in that Aug. 15, 2007, “Nightly News” but undermined both their opinions by implying they were not experts and were only making trouble: “Climate experts say whether hired guns or honest dissenters, deniers are confusing the issue and delaying solutions.”

A paltry 37 people expressing skepticism were included in six months of TV news coverage on the issue across three networks. That included all kinds of people like politicians or government employees, business representatives, celebrities, ordinary people and unidentified people. Only seven of them were scientists like Michaels.

CBS practically banned skeptics from its network, including only four and not a single scientist. The network seemed to adopt the mentality of CBS journalist Scott Pelley, who referred to global warming skeptics as “deniers” in March 2006 when he said, [“If I do an interview with \[Holocaust survivor\] Elie Wiesel, am I required as a journalist to find a Holocaust denier?”](#) Recent “60 Minutes” segments from Pelley indicated he hasn’t changed his mind about balanced journalism.

Those skeptical of the environmental impact of Gore’s Live Earth concerts on July 7, 2007 also earned scorn from the media – even those like Bob Geldof who weren’t questioning the science.

“[T]here have been cynics out there who question whether the artists are practicing what they preach,” said NBC’s Lester Holt on July 7, 2007 “Today.”

You Call Them Experts?

ABC’s Bill Weir claimed that “all the scientists” urge immediate action to stop global warming, but it wasn’t just scientists the three networks relied on to make that case. Far from it.

There were politicians and government workers. Musicians like Madonna and Dave Matthews. Movie star Leonardo DiCaprio. And quite possibly, your next-door neighbor.

What those celebrities said had little to do with science and everything to do with advocacy. Singer KT Tunstall, a Live Earth performer, was quoted by ABC on July 7, 2007.

"I think I am an environmentalist. I mean, I don't have a car. I live in a small apartment," said Tunstall.

Madonna urged Live Earth attendees, "If you wanna save the planet, let me see you jumping up and down."

But it wasn't just globe-trotting stars telling people the planet was in danger and crowding out any other perspective.

Politicians offered perhaps more substance, but certainly not much more science than the Hollywood types. In addition to fawning over Gore, networks interviewed Florida Gov. Charlie Crist (R), California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (Independent), among others.

Reporters also relied on ordinary voices to reinforce the idea that global warming was already a major threat impacting our daily lives.

Only 15 percent of the people used to support global warming positions were scientists – identified as a "scientist" or with a specialty like genetics, ecology, biology or oceanography. A total of 71 scientists were included in six months of coverage. But networks turned to ordinary, unidentified people nearly a third more often than the scientists (101 to 71.)

Networks turned to ordinary people like two Live Earth concertgoers and the unidentified female "consumer" quoted by ABC "World News with Charles Gibson" on Sept. 14, 2007.

"You know, I think everybody's got to think about it. We've got to change," said a woman in a story about carbon labeling of food products.

Those quotes were used to underline the points that reporters made. One story on "Today" Nov. 6, 2007, warned that melting ice could kill off polar bears. Reporter Kerry Sanders included three unidentified people talking about polar bears – supporting his remark that "Worst-case scenario: If the Arctic ice continues to melt, in the next 100 years, the U.S. Wildlife Service says the only place you'll find a polar bear will be at the zoo."

Worries over Arctic melt flooded global warming coverage in the latter half of 2007, but as columnist John Tierney wrote in the Jan. 1, 2008 New York Times: "When the Arctic sea ice last year [2007] hit the lowest level ever recorded by satellites, it was big news and heralded as a sign that the whole planet was warming. When the Antarctic sea ice last year reached the highest level ever recorded by satellites, it was pretty much ignored."

No Need for Debate, Warming is 'Fact'

To many in the news media, global warming and its reported cause were already established fact. It was clear by the way some journalists talked about warming that they had accepted Gore's insistence that "the debate's over."

Just listen to CBS's Harry Smith: "Before we do anything else, there is, in fact, global climate change. It really affects some climates much more than others and it's really caused some real serious problems." Those serious problems Smith was talking about were allergies during a segment on the Aug. 7, 2007 "Early Show."

ABC's Sam Champion seemed to agree. Champion called the fourth U.N. IPCC report "definitive" on Sept. 5, 2007 and said he had been "investigating the alarming numbers of animals that are disappearing due to global warming" in July.

But Dan Harris went the farthest on Dec. 2, 2007 in a story about security risk and global warming. The "World News Sunday" host told viewers to "Think about this scenario: global warming contributes to a severe drought and food shortage in a third-world country. The government collapses. Warlords take over. America is forced to intervene."

Shockingly, Harris then claimed: "It's already happened, Somalia, 1993, with disastrous consequences."

Harris excluded expertise on the Somali situation or any context. Human Rights Watch, a liberal international organization, gave a very different perspective at the time of the crisis back in 1992:

"Somalia has historically been subject to famines, especially in the pastoral areas of the center and north ... [The current famine that threatens Mogadishu and south-central Somalia is radically different in origin and impact. Drought has played only a minor role,](#) and the main victims are poor townspeople, farmers and rural laborers."

The ABC correspondent didn't include any statements about [the way the war was thought to have contributed to the famine.](#)

Journalists weren't the only ones claiming that global warming was a fact, though. But the people journalists chose to interview also included Gore saying the "debate's over" and didn't dispute Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s incorrect statement that there was "zero dissent" on the issue, or Leonardo DiCaprio's assertion of a "90-percent consensus."

"Consensus" was rarely questioned by reporters at all, and ABC's Bill Weir even used the concept of "these 4,000 or so scientists" to hammer at one person expressing a different view.

The media did a terrible job of actually explaining what the IPCC was. Atmospheric scientist Dr. John Christy told [Earth & Sky Web](#) site that the "IPCC would do well to define what each participant truly contributes to each product (i.e. Summary for Policy Makers vs. Full Text) so that the world would know that thousands of scientists never reached a 'consensus' on anything."

"When the Full Text is developed, 'consensus' is a concept held by the chapters' Lead Authors who often ignore or contradict positions offered by the Contributing Authors and Reviewers," explained Christy.

David Henderson, a former chief economist of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), wrote a detailed criticism of the IPCC in the Oct. 11, 2007 Wall Street Journal. He called the process "flawed" and biased because "the Panel members and those who appoint them are of course identified with the policies of their

governments And virtually all governments are formally committed ... to the ‘stabilization of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere’.”

[“\[T\]his puts in doubt the accepted basis of official climate policies,”](#) concluded Henderson.

It Don’t Cost a Thing if It’s Got That Climate Swing

Not only did the networks censor skepticism from stories, but the cost of proposed solutions, small or large, was routinely omitted.

BMI found that 90 percent of the stories didn’t mention cost at all, even though the networks urged immediate action to stop the “climate crisis.”

“NBC Nightly News” ignored cost in a Dec. 18, 2007 report about the recent energy bill passed by Congress.

“What America drives could change dramatically under the energy bill,” said Anne Thompson before quoting David Hamilton of the left-wing environmentalist group Sierra Club.

Hamilton lauded parts of the bill during the “Fueling Change” segment: “This bill means that we will get all the same safety, all the same performance that we’ve ever gotten from our cars, but we’ll get it with more miles to the gallon.”

Thompson and Hamilton both ignored the obvious cost to auto manufacturers of designing vehicles that will be able to meet the new fuel efficiency requirements. Likely, those costs will be passed on to the consumer in the form of higher vehicles prices.

Other plans to curb greenhouse-gas emissions could cost trillions of dollars. One estimate by business consulting firm CRA International put a [\\$4-trillion to \\$6-trillion price tag](#) on the Lieberman-Warner bill, which would mandate scaling back emissions levels to 1990s levels by 2020. That would cost each American man, woman and child \$494 a year.

Network reporters also didn’t focus on how much is already being spent. As the Business & Media Institute reported in its “Fire and Ice” study, more than 99.5 percent of American climate change funding comes from the government – taxpayers – and we spend \$4 billion per year on climate change research.

The Kyoto treaty that was never ratified by the U.S. carried an estimated cost of \$440 billion per year for America. The Senate voted 95 to 0 to reject it.

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Methodology

BMI examined all ABC, CBS and NBC news transcripts that included the terms “global warming” or “climate change” during the most recent six month period – from July 1, 2007, to Dec. 31, 2007. Only stories mentioning those terms were included in the study.

The stories were split into two categories: stories and casual mentions. Casual mentions encompassed anchor briefs shorter than 50 words and longer stories that only mentioned global warming or climate change incidentally (the story was not about that issue).

“Dissent,” for the purpose of this study, included any uncertainty [“I don’t know”], alternative opinions about warming, and caution against making climate change policy decisions without more information. It also included criticism of “solutions” to global warming and “awareness” campaigns like Live Earth -- even when the critic wasn’t disagreeing with manmade climate change, but just the usefulness of worldwide rock concerts.

People quoted in a story that supported climate change claims were placed in the proponent category because their comments were used by the network to support the manmade global warming viewpoint. There was one exception. In one story, scientist Bill Nye presented both positions on the issue in a balanced manner. He was counted as neutral in that story.

Recommendations

- **Report the issue objectively:** Reporters have a professional responsibility to remain objective and avoid inserting their own opinions into their reports. Many in the media have sorely missed that mark when it comes to reporting on global warming and climate change.
- **Include skeptics:** The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics states journalists should [“Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.”](#) It is the media’s job to inform the public, not persuade them by leaving out alternative viewpoints. Particularly, networks should give skeptical scientists the opportunity to share their findings – just like they include scientists who say manmade global warming is negatively impacting the planet.
- **Show Me the Money:** If the U.S. government passes legislation to address global warming, it will carry a cost and American taxpayers have a right to know what it would be. The media need to do a much better job by asking about or including cost estimates of climate change “solutions.”

Resources

[Fire and Ice:](#) Journalists have warned of climate change for 100 years, but can’t decide ‘weather’ we face an ice age or warming.

[Climate of Bias:](#) BMI’s section dedicated to issues of climate change in the media

[Skeptical Scientists:](#) A list of hundreds of scientists who question the science surrounding global warming alarmism

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