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A STORMY FORECAST: IDENTIFYING TRENDS IN CLIMATE CHANGE REPORTING

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	4
METHODOLOGY.....	11
CHAPTER 1 – Climate History: Finding the Front Page.....	14
CHAPTER 2 – Abrupt Climate Change: ‘Climategate’	25
CHAPTER 3 – Seasonal Variations: Losing the Front Page.....	40
CHAPTER 4 – Long Term Forecast: New Ways Forward.....	48
CONCLUSION AND OBSERVATIONS.....	59
APPENDIX: List of Interviews.....	64

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INTRODUCTION

It has been dubbed the news story of the century with the fate of humanity hanging in the balance. But at the time of writing (July, 2010), journalists are struggling to find an audience for the epic tale of Climate Change even in the back pages of their newspapers.

Despite growing scientific evidence supporting the phenomenon of anthropogenic global warming and recent bouts of saturation media coverage, public interest in global warming in the UK has been declining steadily since 2007.¹

This report attempts to provide a snapshot of how UK specialist journalists working in the mainstream media perceive the changing public, political and editorial climate for their coverage of global warming; why they believe public and editorial interest is flagging; and what they perceive as potentially the most engaging journalism to take the story forward.

It is interview-based research with a focus on practical conclusions describing reporting styles that journalists believe could be the most engaging and credible to win a larger, more sustainable audience.

Presently there appears to be a crisis of confidence among reporters covering climate change. Many climate scientists, skeptics and environmentalists have criticized journalists for misreporting the issue in a variety of ways. The BBC now acknowledges climate change as one of the most contentious issues among its audience about which “people feel very strongly.”² Partly as a consequence, the BBC Trust has

¹ Interview with Joe Twyman, YouGov Polling company, www.yougov.co.uk

² Communication with author, BBC News Publicity, 23 June 2010

launched an investigation into the impartiality and accuracy of its science coverage including climate change.³

All journalists in this study acknowledge that climate change is testing their ability to marry complex, long-term science and policy with the hourly sound-bite demands of online newsrooms and fiercely contested global and industrial politics with well-funded aggressive lobby groups.

It means that even reporting on detailed data like tree ring measurements and individual weather station readings can escalate into politically charged arguments.

At times it has generated volatile attitudes in newsrooms. An editor accused a senior UK environmental journalist of having misled editorial management: “You told me the science was settled!”

It was the same newsroom in which the reporter had previously been pressured to change copy from “could” to “will” when describing scientists’ highly qualified projected temperature increases. Now the journalist was being blamed for exaggerating the reliability of anthropogenic climate change.

It is just one of the more extreme fluctuations, some journalists say, afflicting climate change reporting which was especially jolted in 2009/2010 by a succession of dramatic events: the publication of hacked emails between influential climate scientists; the failure of the Copenhagen conference to produce a new international carbon emissions reductions treaty; the revelation of a significant error in the latest IPCC report; and a bitterly cold winter across parts of Europe, Asia and North America.

³ BBC Trust Press Release, 6 January 2010

In the aftermath, many journalists say the tone of their coverage changed; their newsrooms became more skeptical about climate change; and the public became less interested than ever in hearing about it. “It was a turning point,” said a senior broadcaster.

The resurgence of public and newsroom skepticism surprised many journalists and, at time of writing, they were struggling to anticipate how the climate change story could move forward. “We need to hit a fundamental reset button,” said a print journalist.

There was a different outlook in 2009 when mainstream press coverage of climate change had become focused largely on an elite narrative driven by scientists, United Nations officials, government leaders, environmental lobby groups and non-government organizations in the lead up to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) summit in Copenhagen. It featured an underlying acceptance that the science of climate change was settled.

This narrative was mugged first by the failure of political leaders to act in ways commensurate to their rhetoric; and then by the blogosphere which revealed some mistakes by climate scientists that, even though the fundamental science was not shaken, left journalists vulnerable to claims that they had missed a significant story because they had stopped testing the prevailing consensus and rekindled a right-wing assault on climate science including claims of green conspiracies to de-industrialise society.

Covering climate science has always proved difficult for the media and subject to great swings of interest. Its vast, statistical nature laden with uncertainties and distant impacts seems at odds with the personality of a newsroom

that demands declarative, fragmented headlines designed to heighten emotion and attract ratings.

But if climate change is one of the epic stories of this century, reporters and editors need to provide reliable, accessible and engaging information that spans the full gamut of scientific, economic, security and lifestyle implications; and to establish a trusted leadership position amid often confusing and sometimes extremist arguments. How to do this?

Media coverage has often been tied to immediate political developments, spectacularly horrifying predictions or dire weather events that meant public understanding and discussion of the broader significance of the science and how to respond to it could be stymied. Anecdotally, many members of the public seem anaesthetised by a vociferous debate often conducted over their heads between conflicting experts and advocates who are described as alarmists or greenies versus skeptics or vested fossil fuel lobbyists and which seems to result in little action.

Media coverage sometimes adds to public confusion rather than slicing through competing claims. Deputy Editor of Bloomberg Business Week and author of 'The Climate War,' Eric Pooley, has argued that American reporting of proposed US climate legislation has been limited to "he said-she-said" stenography with reporters failing to test many claims made in the debate: "If coverage of climate science is an at risk adolescent, then coverage of climate policy is an infant threatened by crib death" and "... in this ferocious public policy debate, in my view, the most valuable journalistic role is that of referee." ⁴

⁴ Eric Pooley, 'How Much Would You Pay to Save the Planet? The American Press and the Economics of Climate Change,' Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, January, 2009 p.6 and p.3

Australian climate change author and University of Queensland research fellow, Guy Pearse, believes media coverage has also been trapped by a conservative framing that “seems to treat the positions of the two major (political) parties as the boundaries within which legitimate climate debate is covered” augmented by ancillary jockeying between industry and environmental groups. “Consequently this seemingly diverse coverage is really quite limited.” Climate science is covered only as a small part of the political horserace.

This is highlighted in RISJ research on media coverage of the UN 2009 Copenhagen climate change summit where consensus foundered on political arguments. The report, ‘Summoned by Science,’ shows that nearly 80 per cent of surveyed media articles had less than ten per cent of their content dedicated to discussing science and that at the end of the summit, scientists accounted for only four per cent of all surveyed media quotes.⁵

Others criticize media coverage for a persistent apocalyptic tone that fails to convey the uncertainties of the science and turns off an ultimately cynical audience. “How many times can we say it’s worse than we thought?” said one editor.

The challenge for journalists is immense. It is a multi-disciplinary story that requires at least some knowledge ranging from weather patterns to energy policy to potential military deployments, from coastal development to diplomacy and mass biodiversity loss, to name a few.

But BBC’s online environment correspondent, Richard Black, says the argument that journalists need formal science qualifications to cover climate change “isn’t really tenable.

⁵ James Painter, ‘Summoned by Science: Reporting climate change at Copenhagen and beyond’, RISJ, July 2010 p.7 and p.9

Apart from anything else, climate change is now a mélange of science, politics and economics - so to be consistent journalist need qualifications in all three areas, which isn't feasible."

The issue has also become newsworthy at a time when many newsrooms have been downsized while servicing an accelerating 24-hour news cycle. Not enough people. Not enough expertise. Not enough time. All of which helps explain why coverage can seem piecemeal – international negotiations one day, green protests the next, followed by the parlous state of coral reefs and inefficient household light bulbs.

US investigative magazine 'Mother Jones' has editorialized that "It's journalism's job to bring these elements together, to synthesize disparate data points and let the public and policy-makers find the big patterns, bigger pitfalls and biggest opportunities." ⁶

Reactive, same day coverage by general reporters may not be enough, especially since few understand all the complexities. So how can journalists be more effective? Does it require more specialized or more innovative coverage? Does climate change mean we have to change the way we report?

This research focuses on how some of the UK's most senior, specialist journalists rate media coverage of the issue and how they think the story will develop in the future. It also casts a wider net to include the views of some climate scientists, skeptics, environmentalists and pollsters on how the media can do better.

⁶ Editorial, 'Mother Jones,' Climate Countdown Issue, November/December 2009

I have divided the findings into three broad sections: the traditional pitfalls of media coverage of climate change; a description of the Climate-gate controversy and its effects on journalists; and how reporters believe they can better engage an audience in the future.

METHODOLOGY

This research is wholly interview-based. I conducted 28 interviews, 14 with journalists of whom 10 were senior UK journalists including 9 specialist environment reporters.

While mainly targeting frontline climate change reporters in the UK, I conducted 14 other interviews with pollsters, skeptics, environmentalists, climate scientists and a few other key academic participants to incorporate their perspectives on the media.

The key questions asked of each interviewee were:

1. What are the problems with climate change reporting?
2. How can reporters better engage audiences in the future?

The interviews were semi-structured with a variable range of associated questions. The most frequently asked other questions included:

- Which media stories resonate with the public?
- Which stories do not resonate with the public?
- Why is the public apparently losing interest in the story?
- What effect did the Climate-gate scandal have on media coverage?
- Does the media now quote more skeptics?
- Do you accept the science of anthropogenic global warming?
- What did you think of the phrase “the science is settled”?
- How would you describe the feedback you get from your audience?
- How will the story develop from here?
- How receptive are editors to running your stories?

Because of time limits the research presents the subjective judgments and perceptions of specialist reporters and commentators without supporting content analysis of the media.

For instance, the judgment as to whether a story resonates with the public is, in this limited research, a purely subjective one. In the short time available, I was unable to use other quantifiable measures. Some newspapers and broadcasters pointed out that detailed ratings for particular kinds of stories were commercial-in-confidence and not readily accessible.

Journalists were asked to instead rely on their own sense of whether a story had been commented on by colleagues, editors or senior managers as well as by contacts and players in the field or the extent to which a story prompted public comment or feedback or other media follow-up. Activists and commentators relied on their own interpretations of which stories helped their agenda. Pollsters could quantify some public attitudes on climate change but they had not researched the link to the media.

The main focus of the research was frontline mainstream UK environment journalists so research outcomes are skewed towards their specialist perceptions rather than those of general, political or business reporters. Some of the journalists I interviewed hold science degrees and are trained or have trained themselves to read peer review literature – a skill not widely practiced in a newsroom. Only one worked for a tabloid; and only one was an editor.

Eleven of the interviews were conducted face-to-face mainly in or near the subjects' offices; 14 by telephone and 3 via email. Most responded to initial email requests and helped with referrals to other climate change journalists, many of

who know each other. All were done on the basis of anonymity.

Unless otherwise stated, journalists' quotes concern their perceptions of general media coverage rather than specific examples of their own coverage.

Unless otherwise noted in footnotes, all quotes are from interviews done with the author and have not been footnoted.

A comprehensive tabulation of interviews is attached as an Appendix.

Chapter 1

Climate History: Finding the Front Page

In the 1970s, a young UK environmental reporter named Geoffrey Lean was covering what appeared to be an arcane controversy about whether climates could change over time because of human activity. Officials at the Met office, the UK's premier weather forecast and climate research body, dismissed the notion.

"I was told by a senior Met official at the time that climates never change and that humans can't possibly be responsible," Geoffrey Lean says.

Since then Geoffrey Lean has covered the various peaks and troughs of public interest and political controversy in the growing body of science indicating that the global climate is warming because of a build-up of human-generated greenhouse gases.

For more than 20 years the main problem for journalists was convincing editors it was a story at all, according to Lean, who is one of the UK's longest serving environmental reporters and is now a columnist with the UK Telegraph.

Spikes of editorial interest were mainly driven by political interventions, he says. That includes when NASA scientist, James Hansen, testified before the US Senate in 1988 that anthropogenic global warming was almost certainly linked to an increase in heat waves, and in the same year when former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, spoke about the need for precautionary action or the UN's 1992 Rio Earth Summit which produced the first international agreement to reduce carbon emissions.

UK climate scientist and author, Professor Mike Hulme, believes the issue especially came to the fore in the UK media following a carefully orchestrated intervention by the former Labour Government led by Prime Minister Tony Blair beginning with a government-sponsored climate science conference in Exeter in 2005 that warned of possible runaway climate change. It was followed in 2006 by the UK Government's release of the landmark Stern Report that spelt out the dramatic policy implications of the science.⁷

This was amplified internationally by the success of the advocacy of former US Vice President Al Gore through his Academy award winning documentary, 'An Inconvenient Truth,' and in 2007 by another report from the IPCC that underscored the growing scientific consensus on the existence of, and threats posed by, anthropogenic climate change.

The dramatic uptick in political advocacy was accompanied by horror-struck media headlines that initially fuelled public attention. But UK public interest peaked in 2006/07 and has steadily declined ever since even in 2009 when nearly 4,000 journalists reported on the UN climate change conference in Copenhagen.⁸

The frustration is palpable among many climate scientists and advocates who believe ill-informed media coverage is often to blame.

"We scientists need to go directly to the public with our own media and by-pass the traditional media," said Bill

⁷ Stern Review Report on the Economics of Climate Change, UK Treasury, October 2006

⁸ Interview with author, pollster

Chameides, dean of the Nicholas School of Environment at Duke University in the US.⁹ Influential advocate and blogger, Dr Joseph Romm from the Center for American Progress, regularly swipes at “poor,” “dreadful” and “lousy” media coverage and runs headlines in his blog, Climate Progress, such as “How the Status Quo Media Failed on Climate Change.”¹⁰

How do the journalists in this study rate themselves on climate change reporting? “We have failed to engage the public” is how one broadcast journalist put it – while others talked about “a failure of the media on this issue” and “none of us have found what engages a wider audience.”

Most are also struggling where to take the story saying variously: “We need to find new ways” to talk to a “more skeptical readership”; we need to “tell more positive stories”; “the narrative needs to evolve”; and “It’s tough - I don’t think anyone has the answer.”

But a senior broadcast journalist also observed that while climate change journalists may have failed to connect with the public, the issue has been elevated from obscurity and “is now on people’s minds; it is now considered a mainstream issue.”

Climate change is in many ways a diabolical story for newsrooms. Even before journalists put finger to keyboard it seems as if the personality of a modern newsroom is at odds with such a vast, complex story that has many uncertain impacts mostly played out well into the future. Climate science by its very nature is profound, requiring many years

⁹ Bill Chameides, quoted in article ‘Duke’s Nicholas School Dean Bill Chameides; From Academia to EDF Activism and Back’ by Sara Peach in the Yale Forum on Climate Change and the Media, 18 May 2010

¹⁰ Joseph Romm, Climate Progress blog various ‘media’ entries including ‘How the Status Quo Media Failed on Climate Change,’ July 29, 2010.

of specialization to fully comprehend a global phenomenon relying on intricate statistical analysis.

By contrast, news editors need to reduce complexity and probabilities to declarative, hourly headlines and fragmented news bites that thrive on local angles and high emotion. And they need all of this in an era of ‘churnalism’ with less time and resources than ever before. If a story cannot be “sold” to a news desk in 30 seconds, it risks being dropped.

New York Times climate change blogger, Andy Revkin, says this reductionism is part of “an institutional eagerness to sift for and amplify what editors here at The Times call the ‘front-page thought.’” An Australian journalist and former news editor imitated the questions confronting climate science stories at a busy, brutal afternoon news conference: “Look, when *are* the Himalayan glaciers going to melt? Will there be more hurricanes or not? What’s my headline? Is it doom or boom? Where’s the photo?”

A senior broadcast journalist described the painful marriage he faces when writing scripts: “I have always striven to communicate climate change science through the paradigm of risk that always includes major uncertainties but often in the process of inevitable précis and parsing that is standard for news, the uncertainties have been underplayed or even removed. This is regrettable although often inevitable given the extremely tight demands of time and words in the media. TV has proved an extremely difficult medium in this regard as those of us working in it need to make all our precious words conveying uncertainty go over powerful images suggesting the opposite.”

Journalists and other commentators in my research have identified two recurring problems in media coverage:

1) Alarmism

One way to make the story more attractive has been to hype the science by reporting only worst-case scenarios and turning them into a succession of horror stories, such as the following magazine and newspaper headlines:

-‘CLIMATE CHANGE: BE WORRIED, BE VERY WORRIED’¹¹

-‘THE PLANET’S FUTURE: CLIMATE CHANGE ‘WILL CAUSE CIVILISATION TO COLLAPSE’¹²

-‘GLOBAL WARMING: THE FINAL WARNING’¹³

Some examples, like those above, of apocalyptic headlines concerning global warming are eerily similar to trailers for Hollywood disaster films. The comparison was made outright in 2006 by an editorial in ‘The Independent’ that had published a series of dramatic front page stories about a looming global melt down. Commenting on a heat wave then affecting Britain, it said: "Climate change is an 18-rated horror film. This is its PG-rated trailer. The awesome truth is that we are the last generation to enjoy the kind of climate that allowed civilisation to germinate, grow and flourish since the start of settled agriculture 11,000 years ago."¹⁴

This approach was dubbed ‘Climate Porn’ in a 2006 report by the UK Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) that concluded there had been an over-use of doomsday visions by some media, politicians and environmental groups.¹⁵

For journalists, this approach has proved counter-productive in a number of ways. First, the story became snookered. “There’s only so many times you can say that it’s

¹¹ Time Magazine, 28 April 2005

¹² The Independent on Sunday, 12 July 2009

¹³ The Independent, 3 February 2007

¹⁴ The Independent, 30 July 2006

¹⁵ ‘Warm Words: How are we telling the climate change story and can we tell it better?’ Institute of Public of Public Policy Research, 3 August 2006

worse than before,” said one tabloid journalist. Second, it attracted criticism from some climate scientists who objected to such a crude over-simplification of their research; and from skeptics who then blamed journalists and climate scientists for scaremongering. Third, it seems to have contributed to turning off the public that became “disempowered because it’s too big for them; and when it sounds like science fiction, there is an element of unreal,” said Simon Retallack, the head of climate change at the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) when the report was released.¹⁶

Catastrophic stories often include quotes preaching urgent action: “Urgency is especially prone to being discounted as unreasoned alarmism or even passion,” according to ‘Americans and Climate Change,’ a report by the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.¹⁷

As the IPPR report stated, alarmism was not confined to the media but was actively pushed by environmental groups, non-government organizations and governments to grab public attention and win legitimacy for reforms.

Two UK Government sponsored newspaper advertisements using nursery rhymes to highlight possible future horrors of climate change were banned by the nation’s Advertising Standards Authority in March 2010 for exaggerating the Risks associated with global warming and for making scientifically unsupported predictions about the future climate.¹⁸

¹⁶ as quoted in ‘Media attacked for ‘climate porn’’, by Richard Black, Environment Correspondent, BBC News website, 2 August 2006

¹⁷ ‘Americans and Climate Change’, by Daniel R. Abbasi, p.85, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, 2006.

¹⁸ ‘Climate change ‘exaggerated’ in government adverts,’ BBC News website, 17 March 2010

The Copenhagen conference opened with a nightmare video of a little girl wandering through a landscape rent by violent weather.¹⁹ Rhetoric from many international government leaders was similarly dire only to fall well short when it came to action – identified by pollsters as a key reason why the public continues to lose interest in climate change: “There’s a view that - ‘well if they (governments) aren’t worried enough to do anything about it, why should we be?”²⁰

A leading science communicator partly blames scientists for contributing to exaggerated media statements. “Unfortunately there were a few high profile climate scientists who came close to becoming campaigners who then either exaggerated the certainties or at least lived with the media exaggeration. Some even admitted that they were less open about the uncertainties because they feared these would be seized upon by skeptics. I think most scientists now agree this was wrong – underplaying the uncertainties is bad science and much more likely to be seized on by skeptics and backfire against climate science,” said Fiona Fox, from the UK Science Media Centre.

A senior environmental advocate acknowledged NGOs had also contributed to alarmist coverage: “Yes we partly did contribute to the exaggeration of the science. But the media is not off the hook on this. For every 100 press releases we put out, 99 were about other issues like green technology or other solutions. They were only ever interested in the one that gave them the catastrophic headline. It has been too negative.”

¹⁹ ‘Please help the world – COP15 opening film’ at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVGGgncVq-4>

²⁰ interview with Matthew Lockwood, IPPR

2) The Never-ending Debate

Another way to transform a difficult issue into a familiar news format is to package it as a conflict. This has meant framing the scientific consensus of man-made climate change as being instead fiercely contested – and this is especially true for general and political journalists who also cover climate change stories.

“Many of those journalists love politics more than they love science and so they have attached the same adversarial style of reporting to science and it’s not been helpful,” says Fiona Fox from the UK Science Media Centre.

Critics of this debate-style journalism say it has meant that climate scientists have had their peer-reviewed research challenged in sound bites often from non-scientific climate change skeptics who are given the same editorial weight.

A 2004 review of this practice in quality US newspapers found that “adherence to the norm of balanced reporting leads to informationally biased coverage of global warming” otherwise dubbed as a “false balance” or “balance as bias.”²¹

“Reducing climate science and policy considerations to a tit-for-tat between dueling personalities comes at the expense of appraising fundamental challenges regarding the necessary de-carbonisation of industry and society,” one of the review’s authors, Maxwell T. Boykoff, said recently.²²

²¹ "Balance as Bias: Global Warming and the U.S. Prestige Press," Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff, *Global Environmental Change* 14 (2004) p. 125–136

²² “Exaggerating Denialism: Media Representations of Outlier Views on Climate Change,” presentation by Maxwell T. Boykoff, annual meeting American Association for the Advancement of Science, 22 February 2010 as reported in *Climate Progress* blog, 25 February 2010

There is a tendency for the media “to flatly report on both the claims of contrarians, as well as the accusations made about their claims and motives. The ensuing finger-pointing plays into the conflict, drama and personalized stories that drive news. It also distracts attention from critical institutional and societal challenges regarding carbon consumption that calls citizen behaviors, actions and decisions to account,” he said.²³

But journalists are trained that controversial stories need to present two sides when there is an apparent conflict. The more politically charged an issue, the more attractive it is for a besieged journalist to include quotes from the ‘other side’ rather than face allegations of bias and even an internal investigation. This has at times produced stenography “he-said-she-said” journalism without any testing or weighting of the various views.

Inevitably the public is left with the impression that scientists must be in foment about whether there really is man-made global warming – a perception which is demonstrably not true.

US Journalism Professor Jay Rosen has described what he believes are the limits of debate-style reporting: “I do not think journalists should “join the team”. They bridle at that, for good reason. Power-seeking and truth-seeking are different behaviours, and this is how we distinguish politics from journalism. I think it does take a certain detachment from your own preferences and assumptions to be a good reporter. The difficulty is that neutrality has its limits. Taken too far, it undermines the very project in which a serious journalist is engaged. Suppose the forces that want to convince Americans that Barack Obama is a Muslim or wasn’t born in the United States start winning, and more and

²³ *ibid*

more people believe it. This is a defeat for journalism—in fact, for verification itself. Neutrality and objectivity carry no instructions for how to react to something like that. They aren't "wrong", they're just limited. The American press does not know what to do when neutrality, objectivity, balance and "report both sides" reach their natural limits. And so journalists tend to deny that there are such limits. But with this denial they've violated the code of the truth-teller because these limits are real. See the problem?

"... When journalists get attacked from the left and the right, they take it as confirmation that they're doing something right, when they could be doing everything wrong. There's a certain laziness that creeps up too, which you can hear in phrases from the commentariat like "extremists on both sides". No attempt to actually examine centre and margin and compare them across parties; instead, this sorry act of positioning, in which the political centre is associated with truth, common sense and realism. This is a very common prejudice in political journalism."²⁴

In the couple of years leading up to the 2009 Copenhagen conference, most journalists said, they had no longer felt the need to quote skeptics as often instead accepting their reporting should largely reflect the majority scientific consensus and the apparently emerging political bipartisanship on the issue. This was true even in those publications with a largely skeptical audience: "I didn't have to have a skeptic (quoted) every time," said a newspaper journalist.

Criticism of global warming science receded as a story with more media focus on international negotiations, worsening climate signals and national de-carbonisation policies. "We

²⁴ as quoted in '7 Questions with Jay Rosen' in Democracy in America blog, The Economist, 28 August, 2010

had moved on from the science (as a story),” said a broadcast journalist.

Chapter 2

Abrupt Climate Change: ‘Climate-gate’

The eruption of the ‘Climate-gate’ controversy caught most mainstream journalists and their critics by surprise and it still haunts their reporting.

“I had always believed that the media’s emphasis on rhetoric and melodrama could not be sustained but the way it happened surprised everyone. It left journalists wounded about what their position should be,” said University of East Anglia (UEA) climate scientist, Professor Mike Hulme.

The controversy first surfaced in November 2009 following the publication in the blogosphere of hundreds of hacked emails from the internationally influential Climate Research Unit at the UK’s East Anglia University.

A series of official inquiries in the US and the UK have found nothing in the emails that undermines the basic climate science of anthropogenic climate change – a significant finding given the volume of confidential material released and the dramatic claims by some skeptics that they unraveled the scientific consensus.

But the emails also appear to show some of the most powerful climate scientists feeling under siege from skeptics and discussing ways to block access to data and peer reviewed publications and an unwillingness to openly discuss some potentially flawed statistics.

Many journalists believe they initially missed the significance of this story that was eventually amplified in early 2010 when skeptical blogs also exposed a significant

error regarding the melting of Himalayan glaciers in the 2007 report of the IPCC.

“A defining moment in all our careers,” said James Randerson, the deputy editor environment at the Guardian.

In summary their key reflections on Climate-gate are as follows:

- Half of the journalists described ‘ClimateGate’ as a game changer in their reporting of climate change. It was described variously as ‘seminal,’ ‘a massive turning point for all of us,’ ‘a big turning point,’ and as creating a ‘new mood afoot in newsrooms’.
- Half also believed they or their media organisations missed the story or took too long to cover it: ‘We missed its significance,’ ‘we were not quick enough,’ ‘the BBC did miss it,’ and ‘we ignored ClimateGate for too long’.
- When asked about the significance of ‘ClimateGate’, most described it as exposing the imperfect nature of the scientific process: ‘scientists are not squeaky clean’, or ‘it threw into stark relief the way science worked’.
- Four journalists spoke about its effect on their editors: ‘most are sceptical anyway and they saw this as a chance to give sceptics a good airing’, ‘many editors are sceptical and saw this as proof that we'd gone native’, ‘we had to defend the science in editorial meetings’, and ‘editors said the science was now being challenged’.

- Many journalists said it was hard now to generate interest in climate change stories mainly due to fatigue with the story but that 'Climategate' stories were popular with editors and the public.
- Half said they were either giving sceptics more coverage since 'ClimateGate' or were more open to their points of view: 'I am now more inclined to include sceptics', 'I don't use them more often but I am more willing to consider what they have to say', and 'Maybe we should have engaged more credible sceptics earlier'.
- Two journalists spoke about specific changes to how their reports were worded: 'I will no longer say that "the vast majority of scientists" but "establishment scientists" believe in man-made global warming'.

But given that the underlying science has been exonerated in inquiries, what is it that journalists believe they were guilty of?

Firstly, they missed a cracking story that has proved, unlike many other climate change stories, a hit with the public. After struggling to find stories the public wanted to read, a newspaper journalist observed that "Climate-gate ... got a strong response; it made climate change more topical."

One of the main reasons journalists say they missed the story was that they were already overworked in the lead-up to the Copenhagen conference in December and then covering the conference itself. They are dubious that their editors would have given them enough time off from Copenhagen coverage to read and analyse the avalanche of hacked files. Serious mainstream media coverage of the deeper implications didn't come until early 2010.

“To be brutally honest it caught us all unawares,” said a senior broadcast journalist. “Most environmental journalists missed its significance to begin with. Sometimes specialists (reporters) can get so close to a story you can’t see the wood for the trees.

“I think the story acquired a momentum out of proportion to its importance but once it had kicked off and got legs, our editors wanted to keep it running because it was a good story – not because of what the skeptics were saying but because of the procedures and attitudes of the climate scientists.”

“The media ignored Climate-gate for too long,” says James Randerson from The Guardian. “Why? They were busy with Copenhagen and the UEA (University of East Anglia where the climate scientists worked) failed to respond so we didn’t have much to go with.”

Journalists report that after the UEA email controversy broke, the university issued a perfunctory statement and the climate scientists refused interview requests.

Some journalists say the story showed they had been too uncritical of climate scientists and too dismissive of skeptics. Firstly, they had become too comfortable with the idea that the “science was settled” even though that phrase was only meant to describe the underlying consensus science that human generated greenhouse gases are warming the planet. Most major scientific institutions, societies and government bodies agree with this – but the phrase also wrongly implied there were no uncertainties in climate science generally and no questions left to ask.

Secondly, journalists in my research said they often dismissed skeptics for a range of reasons:

- 1) they had failed to win their argument in peer reviewed literature;
- 2) their arguments had been reported, reviewed and rejected – there was nothing new to report;
- 3) some of the loudest advocates seemed extremist and whacky;
- 4) extensive work had been done documenting links between some skeptical organizations and the fossil fuel industry, some part of which had the most to lose from clean energy reform; and
- 5) journalists had been roundly criticized for ‘false balance’ for quoting skeptics too often.

But Climate-gate seemed to show that, at least in part, some of the skeptics’ complaints could be true. After all, skeptics had been saying that climate scientists were censoring their views; blocking transparent examination of their raw data; and that peer review was more like a self-reinforcing club. Journalism’s instinct is drawn to parties seeking to liberate information, to those fighting for more access under the Freedom of Information Act rather than those trying to block it and that is what some climate scientists appeared to be discussing in the hacked emails.

“It reminded us that scientists were not always squeaky clean,” says a broadcast journalist.

At first some specialist reporters say they defended the climate scientists in the newsroom and hosed down the impact of the story. This changed as the story developed in the blogosphere and especially after The Guardian began running a major investigation into what the emails actually contained.²⁵

²⁵ The Climate Files, Fred Pearce, The Guardian online Feb., 2010

Former BBC science correspondent, David Whitehouse, now consults to the Global Warming Policy Foundation, an organization set up by former Tory minister Lord Nigel Lawson who has often questioned the reliability of climate science. Whitehouse believes journalists have forgotten the difference between science communication and science journalism.

He said journalists too often report off the press release when they should be checking the original research, questioning the methodology and cross-examining the scientist about how to interpret the findings. “They should be as interrogative and as willing to risk displeasure with scientists as political journalists. Sometimes a research unit consists of only two professors and a researcher and other scientists are taking their work on trust. Climate-gate was a big failure of journalism. I’ve heard many of the correspondents say ‘Blimey, I didn’t know about that’ when they read through the emails. Well, they should’ve known. They’re paid to know.”

There have been 3 significant flow-on effects for journalists:

1) ‘It’s the Editors, Stupid!’

Probably the most important reaction to the story was not from the public or even among skeptics but in the reporters’ own newsrooms, among their editors who decide when and how prominently stories are run.

Here’s how some senior journalists have described what it was like in their newsrooms after Climate-gate:

- “I have never been this hated by our editors.”
- Editors have a “sense of betrayal.”
- Editors thought environmental journalists had “gone native.”

- An editor accused me of wrongly telling him “the science was settled.”

– “I have now been directed to write about ‘the theory’ of global warming.”

“Climate-gate was extremely damaging in many ways. It gave the impression that journalists had been duped. I think in the end it was mountains out of mole-hills but it looked really bad,” said a print journalist.

Ben Stewart from Greenpeace in the UK has said Climate-gate prompted a “stark shift in the balance of legitimacy” in newsrooms: “There’s a natural pendulum swing in news stories anyway but that happened on stilts with Climate-gate. It was suddenly like a dam bursting and the media felt like it had to give into an instinct to run what they believe was the ‘other side of the story.’ I know that the UK media is fidgety, can’t stay still in one position for too long but this was a big shift.”

“I think a lot of our editors were skeptics anyway and now some believe the science is being challenged so they see a chance to rebalance coverage,” said a senior journalist. “Many of them seem to want the IPCC to be discredited and for skeptics to have a good airing.”

“There’s a new mood afoot in newsrooms,” according to a senior newspaper journalist. “An awful lot of powerful people who don’t believe in climate change” used Climate-gate to lobby editors behind the scenes. “I came under intense pressure to report stories in ways that I thought were inaccurate and biased,” the journalist said.

It’s galling for some reporters who previously fought editors’ efforts to abandon qualified reporting to hype the story. A broadcast journalist says complaints about inaccurate reporting are often due to the headlines and introductions

later attached to reports: “This has caused a vast amount of problems.”

It’s not just that some editors are now more openly skeptical, they are also not as interested in the story anymore - an inevitable dip in the news cycle after the intensity of coverage of the Copenhagen conference.

“It’s typical news cycle stuff – build it up and then knock it down,” said a journalist.

“There would have been a drop-off in coverage even without Climate-gate,” said a broadcast journalist.

After comprehensive coverage of the Copenhagen conference, and perceptions that it did not rate well with the public, climate change is off many news agendas. There were nearly 4000 journalists covering Copenhagen in 2009. Follow-up negotiations at Bonn, Germany, in mid-2010 attracted only 150. A senior broadcast journalist questioned whether he would even attend the next major political summit scheduled for Cancun, Mexico, in December 2010.

There’s a sense that there is little news in climate science anymore. “The problem is finding something new to say; I’ve already written that Yorkshire could turn into Bordeaux by 2050 or that we could have vineyards on the Scottish border. But new research for or against climate change doesn’t get much response anymore.”

“It is more difficult persuading news editors now – they’ll only do it if you’ve got a really compelling story,” said a broadcast journalist.

Fiona Fox from the UK Science Media Centre says press conferences that last year attracted 30 or 40 national journalists now struggle to attract 4 or 5. Stories about

record temperatures that might have made the front page last year are on page 6 even in a paper like The Guardian which campaigns for action to combat global warming. Even that paper's environment editor, Damian Carrington, has noted "it's difficult to get editors interested."²⁶

The Climate-gate controversy is about the only story to consistently attract interest: "I was told by a senior broadcast journalist that it's the only story worth covering for the rest of the year," said an environmental advocate.

2) The Science is Never Settled

The phrase 'the science is settled' was often cited in the lead up to the UN Copenhagen conference by governments, non-government organisations and scientists and was meant to encapsulate the certainty with which most scientists believe that man-made greenhouse gases are causing global warming. But some journalists and commentators now believe it implied too sweeping a claim and most scientists will tell you that science is rarely if ever completely settled – and certainly climate science is full of vast uncertainties about the extent and pace of global warming and its impacts.

Suggestions that the science is settled have damaged its public credibility, according to Professor Mike Hulme who says "science is never settled," "you never close the textbook" and science is not about "papal edicts of truth" but "fallible human investigation."

The recent climate science controversies have meant climate scientists are now suffering from "reputational shock", according to Bob Ward. "I think it will take a long time for

²⁶ panel discussion 'Climate Change – Has the Media got it Right?', One World Media Week, 21 June 2010

the reputation of climate scientists to recover. The crisis is not with the science but with the perceived conduct of scientists and whether the public can trust their professionalism. Initially many climate scientists seemed to deny there were any problems, even though it was obvious to the outside world that something was not right, so a lot of the damage is entirely self-inflicted. Scientists can't repair the damage to trust by just talking about the science – they have to prove they can be trusted through transparency and showing they have safeguards against future mistakes.”

Following Climate-gate, a senior news editor at the BBC, Mary Hockaday, said she believed that climate science “isn't quite a settled question.”²⁷ The corporation's governing body, the BBC Trust, is now reviewing the impartiality and accuracy of science reporting including in climate change and is due to report early in 2011.

A senior broadcast journalist said he was now debating whether to continue to refer to the “vast majority of scientists” when describing who believes that CO₂ is fuelling climate change, “or whether a better phrase is ‘establishment scientists’ ... because it is a debate between establishment science and its critics,” he said.

But some climate scientists complain their research is being needlessly undermined by artificial news cycles and a poor standard of reporting citing exaggeration, errors, distortion, false balance and the politicization of scientific facts: “The laws of thermodynamics have become politicized. That is simply silly. Gravity does not ask who you vote for when you jump off a cliff,” said Professor Andy Pitman from the Climate Change Research Centre at Australia's University of New South Wales. “Why politics affects the reporting of the science depresses me. The media want us to simplify – they

²⁷ as interviewed on The Media Show, BBC Radio 4, 20 January 2010

do not want the detail. That is understandable of course but it leaves space for the skeptics. Climate science is complex and not easily captured in a sound grab.”

Bob Ward, from the London School of Economics, who also advises climate change economist, Lord Nicholas Stern, says that many climate scientists talk about the uncertainties in their work but they should also talk about consequences, and help the media to convey the significance of their findings by framing them in terms of risks. For instance, he suggests saying that “instead of talking about all of the uncertainties in future projections of, say, temperature in London, they should say, as a hypothetical example, Londoners face a 30% increased risk that the Tube will be shut down because of extreme heat waves over the next 10 years ... This is a more practical way of explaining what climate science is saying.”

Most journalists agree the media needs to better communicate the uncertainties regarding the timing and extent of climate change. “We have failed to clarify the uncertainties. It’s trying to report probabilities – and even PhD students can struggle with that!” said a broadcast journalist.

“We have to be even more careful than before and if that gives us (the reporters) power to demand of editors that our statements and introductions are more subtle and nuanced that is for the better,” said another broadcaster.

“For instance when a news headline says climate scientists say temperatures will increase by three degrees – well, they didn’t say that. IPCC Working Group 4 gives a range of possible increases – but it was deemed the spread was too confusing for the audience.”

“A key issue is the difficulty of finding a phrase to explain the near unanimity over the role of CO₂ in warming the planet and on the other hand the wide uncertainties over how it will warm in the future. That causes us a lot of problems,” said a senior broadcaster.

Few general journalists have probably ever read or feel competent to assess peer reviewed scientific research. Many specialist journalists however regularly read peer reviewed research; NYTimes blogger, Andy Revkin, said he also often sent out the research he was analyzing to other scientists for a second round of informal peer review.

But journalists also blame scientists’ poor communication skills for compounding some of the problems with climate change reporting.

Climate-gate is a prime example because journalists were given only a short statement from the University of East Anglia after the hacked emails became public. The IPCC has also come under sustained political attack but has only one formal public relations officer.

“I think climate scientists have been gutless, frightened by the skeptics,” said a newspaper writer. “They left a vacuum after Climate-gate and the skeptics were able to build momentum again.”

Fiona Harvey of the Financial Times is quoted in RISJ research criticizing scientists for “at first reacting disastrously to the UEA emails, claiming the important thing was that they had been stolen. They just did not understand that no-one cared whether they had been stolen or not.”²⁸

²⁸ as contained in ‘Summoned by Science’, p.32, James Painter, RISJ, July 2010

Fiona Fox, from the UK Science Media Centre, believes a media frenzy followed Climate-gate but that more measured reporting would soon return and that there had also been positive effects: public examination and discussion about the processes of science including peer review

Climate-gate led to an immediate change in the way journalists covered climate science press conferences, Fiona Fox said: “Before Climate-gate many of the journalists couldn’t wait to escape Climate briefings to race back and get their ‘worse than previously expected’...or ‘beyond the tipping point’ headlines on the page. But after Climate-gate, they would stay for the whole press conference and question everything the scientists said – every graph, even the basic laws of physics! By the way, the scientist loved it! In the end the science will win out.”

The glaring problem now is that many journalists say they no longer regularly report on the science of climate change other than the political controversy: “Reporting climate science facts is not a major part of what we do – it is mainly politics and policy. I can’t remember a big, pure science story since 2007.”

3) Not all Skeptics are Equal

Most journalists say they are either using more quotes from skeptics or are more open to what they have to say in the wake of Climate-gate.

Professor Mike Hulme says he has noticed a shift in media coverage following Climate-gate with the BBC’s Roger Harrabin covering the Heartland Institute’s annual skeptics’ conference in the U.S. “I’m not sure that would have happened a year ago,” said Hulme.

Traditionally media coverage of skeptics had focused almost exclusively on whether or not they believe in anthropogenic climate change.

“I call them deniers more frequently than skeptics – I judge it on a case by case basis – but I think they are deniers because they deny a body of evidence. I realize it is potentially a pejorative term,” said a broadcast journalist.

But there are many different kinds of skeptics and a range of other debates. Some journalists wondered whether they should have engaged “some of the longer term and more credible skeptics earlier.”

Benny Peiser said the Global Warming Policy Foundation is a broad church covering outright skeptics to agnostics to those who accept the IPCC consensus. But the media typically demonized all skeptics as being deniers of global warming with links to the fossil fuel industry: “I don’t think skeptics should get half of the media coverage, they are a minority opinion and often they do not have the research expertise in science. But where there is a track record of peer reviewed research, they should be asked for a second opinion.”

Fiona Fox agrees that until recently, there was a climate in the media that “even an intelligent skeptic felt like they couldn’t ask questions and that was wrong.”

David Whitehouse acknowledges that skeptics have been hurt by what he calls the loony fringe of the movement, but “until recently anybody with reasonable scientific doubts was tarnished” as being a denier or corrupt. “Yes there is a scientific consensus but journalists have to spend time getting to know those who don’t agree and find out why.”

There are also debates other than whether global warming is happening. Professor Mike Hulme says the media focuses on this debate because “it is an easy hit, it makes it sound as if it’s goodies versus baddies in science.” What is needed is a range of broader range of discussions about the responses society wants to pursue, about the potential risks of climate change and different social and political options: “Too often when we think we are arguing over scientific evidence for climate change we are in fact disagreeing about our different political preferences, ethical principles and value systems.”

Other commentators believe if the media want to report on conflict, then the most credible argument is with those climate scientists who believe the data is more extreme than that contained in the 2007 IPCC report.

Professor of environmental studies, William R. Freudenburg of the University of California, Santa Barbara, has pointed out that new scientific findings are more than 20 times as likely to indicate that global climate disruption is “worse than previously expected,” rather than “not as bad as previously expected ... There are lessons both for scientists and for the mass media. Scientists need to be more openly skeptical toward supposed “good news” on global warming. Reporters need to learn that, if they wish to discuss “both sides” of the climate issue, the scientifically legitimate “other side” is that, if anything, global climate disruption is likely to be significantly worse than has been suggested in scientific consensus estimates to date.”²⁹

²⁹ abstract ‘Use of Scientific Argumentation Methods in Climate Debates’, delivered annual meeting American Association for the Advancement of Science 22 February, 2010

Chapter 3

Seasonal Variations: Losing the Front Page

Does the public care as much about 'Climate-gate' as the journalists? Joe Twyman of the UK polling company YouGov says there has been noticeable public fallout even though the science of global warming remains unchallenged: "The facts matter less than the perceptions and many people now think there's something dodgy. We hear it in our online focus groups with some people saying 'climate scientists get the figures they need or they're out of a job.'"

A UK Populus survey conducted for the BBC in February 2010 showed that 73% of the people who said they were aware of Climate-gate and the IPCC mistake stated that the media coverage had not changed their views about the risks of climate change.³⁰

But a dramatic drop-off was recorded in the same survey among those who believed anthropogenic global warming was happening to 26% in February 2010 from 41% just four months earlier in November 2009.³¹

YouGov polls show a steady decline in public interest in climate change from a peak in 2007 of 78% to 62% in 2010. And those who believe action is needed now has also dropped from 38% in 2007 to 28% in 2010.³²

"Through the floor" is how Ben Stewart from UK Greenpeace has described the poll figures - although another poll showed that 71% of Britons remained concerned about

³⁰ 'Climate skepticism "on the rise", BBC polls shows', BBC website, 7 February, 2010

³¹ *ibid.*

³² www.yougov.co.uk

climate change in June 2010. “By no means has there been a collapse in confidence in climate science,” said Professor Nick Pidgeon, who led the University of Cardiff study.³³

So is the public interested in climate change stories? Journalists believe they rate poorly. “Climate stories are not hugely popular and are less popular than straight stories science stories on astronomy or animal behaviour,” said an online journalist. “Back a few years we had more visually stark stories about polar bears and melting ice and they got a lot of attention and sounded very dramatic and were easy to understand, more than carbon trading.”

A broadcast journalist, who decided to move out of reporting on climate change, said he had been advised that running climate change in prime time meant losing hundreds of thousands of viewers. “The (programmers) are against it because it loses ratings. The wave (of public interest) has gone. There is climate change fatigue, I think. That is why I am not (reporting) it now.”

Journalists refer to the “disconnect” between what climate science knows and how the public reacts to climate change. “The single thing that strikes me is the disconnect between science and politicians in terms of how firmly sure they are about anthropogenic climate change and how that is so different to the general public. Why is that?” asked Damian Carrington, environment editor of The Guardian while facilitating a panel discussion.³⁴ “There is a disconnect between what we are reporting and the reality of people’s daily lives,” said a broadcast journalist.

³³ ‘Confidence in Climate Science remains strong, poll shows,’ The Guardian, 11 June, 2010

³⁴ discussion panel ‘Climate Change – Has the Media Got it Right?’, One World Media Week, 21 June, 2010

Journalists and commentators in my research believe there are various reasons beyond the media why the public loses interest:

- The impacts are too distant in time and geography compared to daily economic concerns;
- The UN Copenhagen conference was so hyped that when it failed to produce a treaty, people defaulted to believing that the issue can't be that serious after all; and
- The weather – if it is cold, polls show less interest in climate change.

There is a critical difference between weather (this week's forecast) and climate (long-term trends over decades) but there's anecdotal evidence from journalists that their audience does not understand this or other basic elements of the global warming story.

"You have to presume the vast majority do not get it because one knows that the general scientific awareness in the community is not very high," said one journalist.

In a report for the Reuters Institute, 'Public Trust in the News', a survey found that despite blanket coverage of the 2008 US presidential primary elections, not a single person in focus groups arranged for the study "had even a basic understanding of what was happening" and that "these findings neither dismayed nor surprised the majority of journalists we spoke to." ³⁵

But climate change policy analyst, Matthew Lockwood from IPPR, contests reporters' concerns that the story is a dud: "I want to ask journalists where is your evidence that people

³⁵ 'Public Trust in the News: A constructivist study of the social life of the news', Stephen Coleman, Scott Anthony and David E. Morrison, RISJ, June 2009

are not interested in this story? The majority of people polled consistently say they believe there is man-made climate change, that it is real and that they are worried about it. And that is despite the efforts of the on-going climate change denial industry. What is happening is that it's dealt with differently by various groups in society. Only about 5-10% rate it as a priority but then only a small minority of people generally are really motivated by environmental issues. It is more likely to be treated skeptically by older, conservative men. And it tends to most concern younger, female Liberal-Democratic voters. Some people are more interested in green technology, others in renewable energy. Climate change as an issue is vast, it's not as focused an issue as smoking or leaded petrol. It is going to take a long time and there will be an inevitable backlash when policies tackle really sensitive areas like the cost of electricity, or driving or flying. But on what basis do journalists say that is not of interest to their readers?"

All of the journalists I interviewed said they personally accepted the fundamental climate science of anthropogenic global warming. But when asked if they should be taking steps to better engage their audience since they accepted that the fate of humanity could be at risk, journalists responded variously:

- "It's not my job to save the planet"
- "It's not my responsibility to promote climate change"
- "It's not my job to educate" people about climate change. -
- "My job is to report the news."

Some also spoke of the need to "go back to basics" and report the underlying science: "We need to start from where people are."

An Australian newspaper journalist said he believed that the media was unusually important in setting the tone for the public discussion on climate change because it was a

relatively new concept without the usual references used by people to contextualise how they feel about it: “The media is more potent on this issue because it is still a new issue. Traditional issues like industrial relations have a bedrock of perceptions, experiences and knowledge that audiences call on but people are still learning about climate change.”

Journalists said their belief in climate science did not affect their professionalism. But it raises questions, not explored in this report, about whether there are extra emotional dimensions to reporting on concerns that the fate of humanity could be in the balance. One reporter spoke of how climate change is more prone to over-simplification and distortion because it is “more subtle, more ambiguous and more dangerous to misreport.”

According to a broadcast journalist “some of my colleagues feel a tremendous commitment to the issue. Sometimes I think they have become too close to their sources and are more like advocates of climate change. I accept the science but it does not drive me to want to change the world.” New York Times blogger Andy Revkin believes European environmental correspondents tend to be “more sympathetic” to the aims of the environmental movement than reporters in the U.S.

Identifying climate change policies too closely with green groups has become a key reason for the ideological wedge now polarizing pockets of public opinion including the skeptical movement. While many journalists have tried to transcend the politicization of climate science, the increasing role of green groups in mainstream politics because of climate change is the *realpolitik*.

“Environmental and NGOs do provide a lot of the agenda. Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are no longer the radical fringe. They have become mainstream political

players who are in and out of Whitehall (meaning UK government administration) more frequently than journalists. They are big players,” said a broadcast journalist.

“Do you know how David Cameron (UK Prime Minister) and David Miliband (former Labor Climate Change minister) met socially for the first time after Cameron had become Tory leader? Coming in and out of a Friends of the Earth party,” said a senior newspaper writer.

Fiona Harvey from the Financial Times has been quoted in RISJ research complaining that the role played by NGOs at the UN summit at Copenhagen in 2009, “was ‘exceptionally destructive’ for ‘fomenting discord among developing nations’ and ‘for their rejection of all compromises (which) provided a cover for those governments with a vested interest in the talks’ failure.’ She names Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and Oxfam as particularly at fault. She points to the enormous influence they wield over journalists, and particularly those who are covering summits for the first time. Their constant emails, their physical presence and their daily press conferences, she says, contributes to this.”³⁶

Some journalists believe their reports have been popular partly because they criticized what they regarded as unrealistic or extreme aspects of the green agenda that they say is “deeply anti-materialistic” or “anti-capitalist.” Their reports avoided a “preachy” tone. “We report on what’s being done to be more sustainable but we go out of our way not to be seen as earth-loving people” because the public is tired of “carbon guilt” and being told they’re “killing the planet,” said a BBC journalist.³⁷

³⁶ ‘Summoned by Science,’ p.21, by James Painter, RISJ, July 2010

³⁷ Steven Duke from ‘One Planet,’ BBC, during a discussion panel ‘Climate Change - Has the Media Got It Right?’, One World Media Week, 21 June, 2010

Journalists are also aware of the hefty political muscle of the fossil fuel lobby that has funded key groups arguing against climate science.³⁸ US science historian, Professor Naomi Oreskes, has also documented what she says has been a concerted push by industry along with a handful of powerful anti-communist and rabidly pro-free market scientists who “obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming” in a bid to stop government regulation.³⁹

One UK newspaper journalist described a systematic campaign of lobbying of senior editorial management after Climategate to change the way the journalist reported climate change including questioning the validity of climate science: “The debate here (in the UK) didn’t used to be left versus right, but now it is getting more like the United States. There are an awful lot of powerful people who don’t believe in climate change, conservatives mainly and they have been frantically putting their views across behind the scenes to our editors and senior editors and at the moment our editors are caving in.”

The left-right polarization of the political debate arose at the same time as the blogosphere opened a new conduit between journalists and the public and which has become the climate change battleground of choice. It is rough going, according to many journalists. Many of them fend off abusive public feedback on blog-threads. “Up to 90 per cent is like crazy hate mail, mainly from skeptics,” said an editor. Other journalists noted: “Comfortably more than half is abusive” and “Since Climate-gate it has become very heated, aggressive and personally insulting maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of the time but it is from both camps – skeptics and green.”

³⁸ ‘Climate Cover-Up’ James Hoggan, Greystone Books, 2009.

³⁹ ‘Merchants of Doubt’, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, Bloomsbury press, 2010

A broadcast journalist said climate change was now one of the most contentious issues for the BBC - two other interviewees compared it to the sensitivities surrounding coverage of the Middle East.

Journalists did not believe this intense interaction skewed their coverage but one admitted that sometimes “it pisses me off” when the abuse was personal and uninformed. “They accuse me of being lazy when I’d just worked for 12 hours straight!”

Stories on climate science draw the most fire. When stories canvas solutions or new technology or business responses there is less abusive feedback. “Four-fifths of my emails were abusive but since I’ve shifted to more positive solutions, the nasty responses start disappearing,” said a senior newspaper writer.

This intense left-right polarization has affected how some journalists see climate change as a story: “The future has become more and more controversial. It is now so polarized I think the debate has lost its way,” said a senior writer.

Chapter 4

Long-term Forecast: New Ways Forward

Any suggestions about how to move forward must begin with an examination of what journalists presently believe does, or does not, work with their audience.

Most found it difficult to identify what reporting best engaged the public. But there were some stories most often mentioned by journalists as being popular with their editors and readers: extreme weather events, animals facing extinction, visibly shifting behaviour by significant flora and fauna and new green technology solutions. At the time of writing, the most reliable draw-card for most journalists remained the controversy over climate science.

Two reporters who both command mass general audiences provided the following assessments of which of their recent stories were successful and which were not:

DAVID SHUKMAN, BBC TV ENVIRONMENT
CORRESPONDENT

SUCCESSFUL adventurous reporting in the field with a strong science base visual and a clear narrative connecting faraway events with audience such as:

- 1. The melting of ice in the North-West passage;*
- 2. Amazon de-forestation to provide soya products to UK consumers; and*
- 3. Frontline reporting on a Bangladesh village losing defence against rising sea levels.*

UNSUCCESSFUL- anything from Copenhagen.

JOHN INGHAM, DAILY EXPRESS ENVIRONMENT
CORRESPONDENT

SUCCESSFUL reporting is usually something readers can relate to such as:

- 1. The early arrival time of swallows;*
- 2. Exposing green-washing; and*
- 3. The skeptical controversy.*

UNSUCCESSFUL - anything from Copenhagen.

It is obvious but necessary to point out that different approaches work best with different audiences. And beyond general news there is a range of niche markets that are proving to be reliable consumers irrespective of Climate-gate and on-going political arguments. For instance, there is a demand for a steady diet of business stories dealing with national and international policies, carbon trading, renewable energy investment and new technology solutions. There is also a committed green audience.

The Guardian newspaper⁴⁰ is a good example of a media outlet successfully capturing a chunk of the international green market. Three years ago it appointed the largest dedicated team of reporters in the UK to cover environmental and climate change issues. A six-person 'environmental pod' was established including two overseas correspondents in the US and China. Some were assigned specialist areas such as green technology and green living but all reporters were given a brief to think about environmental coverage "on a day to day basis" and to count on having extra resources "when big stories came up." There were also three specialist editors and two regular opinion writers and bloggers including George Monbiot.

⁴⁰ www.guardian.co.uk/environment

It was a bold step that elevated environmental coverage to the same status of other newsroom specialist teams that cover politics, business and sport. It represented a definitive statement of the values and market goals of the newspaper. It certainly outstrips most other newsrooms that assign just one reporter to cover the environment.

“At the time the decision was made there were several factors – the stories about the science appeared to be much worse than previously thought, the scientific case had been made and the (UK) government and the opposition had decided to advocate on it,” said James Randerson, editor of The Guardian’s environment website, which runs stories more extensively than the printed version.

The move to cover the environment as a major daily news gathering round has thrown up a range of scoops and unique stories such as a variety of stories about pollution in China, Randerson said.

It also became the first mainstream media newspaper to specifically assign a journalist to read through all the hacked ‘Climate-gate’ files and to provide a thoughtful and at times confronting analysis of what they meant. This was published as a 12-part on-line series in February 2010 and subsequently in a book called ‘The Climate Files,’ by Fred Pearce – although it prompted controversy within The Guardian as to whether it provided too much coverage for Climate-gate. “Did we turn it into much more of a debate than it was?” asked one senior journalist.

It has also taken an activist stance advocating the 10:10 campaign that encourages the public to reduce their carbon footprint by 10% by the end of 2010.⁴¹ “This raised eyebrows but it is not unusual for papers to run campaigns

⁴¹ www.1010global.org

such as one on privacy,” said Randerson. Given the newspaper’s editorial position on global warming he said “it would be strange if we did not have a campaign around it as well.”

The Guardian’s online coverage seems to have hit the mark with its target audience and according to Randerson, is now “the biggest in the UK and sometimes in the world.” It registered 2.8 million unique users in May 2010 and now has more readers in the US than in the UK.

While he would not divulge figures, citing commercial-in-confidence, he said there were some clear public favourites on the website. These included the leak of an early controversial draft text from the Copenhagen conference which rated “off the scale,” to basic science stories on temperature trends as well as announcements by key players such as Al Gore or James Hansen, controversies like Climate-gate, quirky green technology and a live blog by a man trying to live without any money.

Climate change reporting can also be more effective beyond the strictures of straight news reporting which has little time to explain complex theories and probabilities. Newspaper features and essays and long-form TV and radio have more room for context, explanation and nuance – and even humour. An innovative and popular example of this was the BBC Newsnight series, ‘Ethical Man.’⁴²

Between 2006 and 2008 the program ran regular ‘reality TV’ reports showing how reporter Justin Rowlatt struggled to reduce his family’s carbon footprint. Combined with one of the BBC’s first blogs, Ethical Man became an on-air hit which

42

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/ethical_man/default.stm

Justin Rowlatt says still resonates on the street and on-line to this day.

“I felt like we were doing a story that really mattered to people and through the blog we were able to pull it all together,” said Rowlatt.

This was not news reporting but specialist feature reporting in which Rowlatt discussed his reluctance to get rid of his car or to pay the huge costs of insulating his house. It showed him confronting green entrepreneurs when their products didn’t work and politicians whose lifestyles fell short of their rhetoric.

For instance the program revealed in 2006 that then Tory leader, David Cameron (Now Prime Minister), who had rebadged his party as committed environmentalists, rode his bicycle to work each day often followed by a chauffeur-driven car carrying a change of shoes and clothes. They dubbed it ‘Shoegate.’

“The segments always were milking it for humour but essentially we took a skeptical approach to green living to see what really works. It was the skeptical approach of science meets reality TV. It was not preachy and at the time it was still a little novel to talk about carbon footprints,” said Rowlatt.

The segments contained an infectious energy and introduced innovative visuals to portray difficult concepts such as a pile of chocolate bars to depict energy.

Why did these segments work where other carbon reducing segments had not? Partly because Ethical Man adopted a recognizable ‘everyman’ tone: Rowlatt wanted to do the right thing by the environment but was honest about how painful it was. He pursued practical results by testing a

variety of possible solutions. He says it was also important that he did not sanctify the green movement or environmentalists. One of his most successful stories was a humorous dig at some of the wacky lifestyle ideas being promoted at an environmentalists' weekend fair. He also showed it was uneconomic for he and his family to pay for house insulation given current UK government policies. In the end, he says, Ethical Man showed how little carbon he and his family saved after a year - just 20 per cent.

Rowlatt's reports were criticized at times by environmentalists but rarely by skeptics. Emails were "overwhelmingly supportive," he said. "The whole tone of our feedback was different." The segment has now been dropped. Rowlatt says Ethical Man ran its course and there now seems to be a diminished editorial and public appetite for climate change activism.

What Next?

Nearly all journalists provided a grim forecast for future climate change reporting to a general mass audience and struggled to see new ways forward. "I don't know," "I have no idea where this story is going" and "That's tough – a lot of people are asking this question" were the most frequent responses. "The narrative has got to evolve. It got us to Copenhagen but we now need to find different ways of talking about it."

Below are some ideas:

1) Back to the Future

It is time to report again on the basic science. "We should start from where people are," said several journalists. "Time to push the reset button and work out what it is that we know and don't," said a newspaper journalist. "Kind of sucks because we thought we had moved onto policy responses but I think we have to go back to go forward," said Curtis

Brainard, environment editor at The Columbia Journalism Review.

But traditional journalism needs to change to engage people in a complex story like climate change. Former Controller of Future Media for Journalism at the BBC, Nic Newman, says editors and journalists need to imagine new ways of involving the public in telling the story such as through data collection, on-line experiments and frontline video reporting: “The science and environment website is among the top 5 on the BBC. There are always a surprisingly high number of hits even on background articles and features. Young people especially want to find their own way into and through a story and afterwards become more attached to it.”

New York Times blogger, Andy Revkin, says taking the audience into the process of science is a more sustainable way of informing people about climate change rather than waiting for major research reports. Sometimes by accompanying scientists in the field, sometimes by asking them to send audio clips or imagery, Revkin tries to provide a view of field studies as they unfold: “One of the reasons the public has a hard time making science-based decisions, to my mind, is the lack of broad understanding that scientific research is not the process of revealing crystalline truths, but rather a journey toward understanding, with lots of bumps, false turns and rarely a final end point.”

2) End of ‘Climate Change’ as a label

Still others predict the label Climate Change will disappear instead morphing into an energy, technology and business story. This view is shared by New York Times blogger Andy Revkin, Columbia Journalism Review environment editor Curtis Brainard, UEA climate scientist, Mike Hulme and one senior broadcast journalist interviewed for this research.

“Climate change will fragment into smaller issues. The big rolling bandwagon that led to a peak in public interest in 2007 is over and we may never go back to that. It will lose its appeal now as a label and lose some of its mobilizing power as a narrative. The issues won’t go away but will turn into separate disciplines such as energy or tropical forests,” said Mike Hulme.

“As Andy Revkin says, climate change is really an energy and sustainability story,” said Curtis Brainard. “Some of my favourite reporting now is from local coverage of the coal industry in Kentucky.”

A leading green activist, Kelly Rigg, executive director of the Canadian-based Global Campaign for Climate Action, has also written about how the media has missed “the paradigm shift ... The big message: the climate clock is still ticking but instead of counting down to Doomsday, it is clocking a global race towards a low carbon future.”⁴³

Polls may provide support for this view: whereas public interest in climate change has been falling, interest in energy issues such as nuclear, electricity and renewable energy has stayed buoyant at around 80%, according to Joe Twyman from YouGov polling company.⁴⁴

Polls also show that government policies dealing with climate change attract more support if they don’t include the term climate change, Twyman says.⁴⁵ A broadcast journalist wondered if the terms global warming and more recently climate change adequately sum up what is happening. He

⁴³ ‘The Movement with a Thousand Faces’, Kelly Rigg, Huffington Post, 4 November 2010

⁴⁴ archive search at www.YouGov.co.uk

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

was drawn to the term ‘global weirding’ proposed by ‘US author, Thomas Friedman.⁴⁶

Changing the language of climate change is the focus of an experiment at a local TV station in South Carolina where academics from the Climate Change Communication Centre at George Mason University in Washington DC are testing a series of short educational messages to be delivered by a popular local weather reporter. They include using the expression “heat-trapping pollution” rather than “greenhouse gases” and explaining how warmer air holds more moisture and could lead to more heavy rains.

“We think that discussing real effects of climate change that are happening right now in ways people can personally experience them are more apt to encourage people to care about climate change than are discussions of more emotionally remote consequences ... such as those happening at the poles. We will find out from testing if we are right,” said Professor Katherine Rowan.

3) Collaborations

The US is throwing up a series of journalistic collaborations in a bid to improve the quality and depth of reporting.

‘Climate Central’ is a hybrid team of more than 20 journalists and scientists set up in 2008 to produce stories for the web and for established print and television outlets. It has already aired material on PBS’s ‘Newshour’ but so far has failed to achieve inroads into local TV news programs although it offers free reports produced in the field and checked for scientific accuracy. “It means I have strong backup for my stories,” said Climate Central journalist, Michael Lemonick.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ ‘Global Weirding is Here,’ Thomas L. Friedman, New York Times op-ed, 17 February, 2010

⁴⁷ www.climatecentral.org

Another team of 40 reporters working for the niche US online news service, Energy & Environment Publishing, finalised a partnership deal with New York Times online which now runs some of their copy from their daily ClimateWire and GreenWire news services.⁴⁸ E&E Publishing has also expanded its coverage beyond Washington DC opening bureaus in New York, San Francisco and Brussels. “The New York Times is not able to expand its newsroom to cover everything that’s going on,” E&E Publishing editor Kevin Braun has said. “They need someone to help flesh out the excellent content that they’re already producing.”⁴⁹

Meanwhile a group of senior magazine journalists and editors, including from Mother Jones, the Atlantic Monthly, Grist, Slate and Wired, joined forces in 2010 to produce better researched and presented climate change stories under the banner ‘The Climate Desk.’ Mother Jones co-editor Clara Jeffrey has said climate change is often covered “in a very siloed way. When we were contemplating how this topic could be better covered we thought what if we could have Wired’s design team or Slate’s great pulse on culture? And you start to imagine the different skill sets and how they can partner up to make something that’s bigger than the sum of its parts.”⁵⁰

The quest to find new ways for journalists to better connect the climate change story with their audience is palpable on both sides of the Atlantic.

⁴⁸ www.eenews.net

⁴⁹ As quoted in Yale Forum on Climate Change and the Media, 12 November, 2009

⁵⁰ www.theclimatedesk.org

One UK broadcast journalist summed up the state of flux: “If someone comes up with the magic formula, can I please have it?”

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Observations

Many UK reporters covering climate change are struggling to rebound after the saturation coverage of an inconclusive 2009 Copenhagen summit proved unpopular and, combined with Climategate, unleashed an editorial backlash. For now, their newsrooms have lost interest. A series of extreme temperature records in 18 nations in 2010 as well as catastrophes such as the Russian bushfires and the Pakistan floods failed to win back the front page even though scientists say they are the kind of events more likely to occur because of climate change. Even journalists at the environment-oriented newspaper, *The Guardian*, are fighting for space.

Former BBC correspondent Mark Brayne says he's been told "internal editorial discussions now underway at the BBC on planning next year's news agenda have in fact explicitly parked climate change in the category 'Done That Already, Nothing New To Say.'" He predicts newsrooms will remain largely disinterested until "very large numbers of people start dying. As in hundreds of thousands to millions and quite clearly climate-change related."⁵¹

Of course the news agenda can change in a flash. Who could have predicted in 2009 that climate change stories would fall so fast and so far from the news spotlight? But it is wrong to assume the story has gone away. Consider the positives.

⁵¹ as quoted in 'Exclusive: Former BBC correspondent and editor explains the drop in quality of BBC's climate coverage', *Climate Progress* blog, 22 September, 2010

While there has been a decline in public interest and acceptance of climate science, most polls in the UK, the US and Australia show a majority still believe that the scientists are probably right and governments should be taking action. Throughout all the controversies, that figure has remained fairly steady. It is a huge potential audience.

Even without that mass reach, influential swathes of the community continue to tune in to relevant news and analysis while policies responding to climate change risks proceed across business and various tiers of government from international bodies to local councils. The story is live – although these days it often goes by other names in niche markets. New York Times blogger Andy Revkin says it is now an energy, technology and business story; for others it is a sustainable lifestyle story or an infrastructure adaptation story or a pure science story.

So why has there been a seeming mass media retreat from the story? Climate scientists almost uniformly criticize journalists for overreacting to Climategate, pointing out the underlying science remains sound. But after the failure of the UN Copenhagen summit to win an audience, editors didn't need much of an excuse to jettison prime time coverage.

Many UK journalists in this research partly blame themselves for failing to better engage their audience while at the same time worrying they have also failed to properly convey the complexities and probabilities of the science. They are uncertain how to do both.

Anecdotal evidence suggests most people do not understand the science of climate change nor share the scientists' certainty, accepted by the journalists, about the possibly devastating consequences unless there is urgent action.

Some journalists believe there is a need to return to more educational reporting on climate change to help their audience better understand the science. Some believe they need to change the language they choose to communicate global warming concepts and its risks. Whether their editors will facilitate space for this is another matter given its editorial reputation as a ratings dud.

But even if it's regarded as boring by some editors on the news desk, it continues to generate a ferocious political contest with a resurgent climate skeptics and denialist movement that caught some journalists off guard. In many ways, the specialist reporters interviewed for this research seemed to have been as buffeted by this debate as some climate scientists.

Given that trillions of dollars are at stake in the fossil fuel industry and emerging clean energy and carbon markets, it should not be surprising that the jockeying over the ramifications of climate change is intense.

This political dimension has increased hugely the pressure on reporters who probably assumed that international climate change findings supported by just about every major scientific body and institution in the world were a reliable foundation. But skeptics assert those bodies have got the science wrong. How does a reporter responsibly handle such claims? The BBC Trust inquiry into science reporting has among its terms of reference "whether output gives appropriate weight to scientific conclusions including different theories and due weight to the views expressed by those skeptical about the science." It is also investigating whether "assertions about scientific theories are ... based on sound evidence (and) thoroughly tested" and whether coverage is "sufficiently alert to both the strengths and weaknesses of peer reviewed material." But how much detailed checking of scientific research is required or

possible in a same day story? And how does a general reporter who probably has never read, let alone assess, peer reviewed research apply those standards if assigned a climate change story?

It becomes even murkier when considering the political dimension of the controversy. In an age of aggressive spin where there are scores more public relations staff for every journalist, it is comforting for editors to rely on the standard formula of 'he-said-she-said' in the hope that it will fend off time-consuming complaints from management and the public.

But it has sold the audience short. One reason they may have turned away from climate change stories in the mainstream media is because much of the reporting was initially unrelenting in its alarmism and then was often limited to an elite discussion between scientists, environmentalists and governments that proved unproductive at Copenhagen. When the story opened up to other voices it was usually portrayed as an irreconcilable conflict between those who "believe" or not in anthropogenic climate change. There's nowhere to go with these narratives.

But underlying these short-term news cycles is a number of titanic struggles and shifts which I believe will force the issue back into mainstream press coverage including the biggest global energy transformation since the industrial revolution, the reformation of an inward-looking scientific community to accept greater transparency and robust public debate and explanation, the great ideological clash over climate change theory including right-wing fears that it is a front for left-wing eco-fascism and government and corporate tussles over how to respond; and the unfolding and gobsmacking scientific mapping of the phenomenon.

And then there's the actual climate. If the scientists are right,

it will produce increasing horror temperature, drought and precipitation records as well as natural catastrophes. How we adapt to a dramatically changing climate, if or when it emerges, could become the most important story of all.

The sprawling nature of the societal impacts of climate change means specialist science and environment reporters will not capture all the angles – it is now also a key political and economic story and the breakdown of how different sections of the newsroom approach the story might make another interesting research paper.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW LIST

All 28 interviews were conducted during my fellowship at the RISJ, Oxford in May and June 2010.

UK JOURNALISTS (10)

Broadsheet newspapers – 3
Tabloid newspapers – 1
On-line only – 1
Broadcasters – 5
(in person 6; telephone 4)

Named quotes have been cleared with journalists including James Randerson, online editor The Guardian Environment; Justin Rowlatt, Ethical Man, BBC Newsnight; Richard Black, BBC online environment correspondent; David Shukman, BBC TV environment and science correspondent; and John Ingham, Daily Express Environment Correspondent.

US JOURNALISTS (3)

- Andy Revkin, Dot Earth Blog, New York Times (telephone)
- Curtis Brainard, environment editor, Columbia Journalism Review (telephone)
- Michael Lemonick, Climate Central (telephone)

AUSTRALIAN JOURNALISTS (1)

Broadsheet newspaper – 1 (in person)

CLIMATE SCIENTISTS (3)

- Professor Mike Hulme, University East Anglia, UK (telephone)
- Professor Andy Pitman, University New South Wales, Australia (email)
- Professor David Karoly, University of Melbourne, Australia (in person)

POLLSTERS (1)

- Joe Twyman, YouGov polling company UK (telephone)

CRITICS (2)

- Benny Peiser, director, Global Warming Policy Foundation, UK (telephone)
- David Whitehouse, former BBC science correspondent, consultant Global Warming Policy Foundation, UK (telephone)

CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIVISTS (2)

- Ben Stewart, UK Greenpeace (telephone)
- Kelly Rigg, executive director, Global Campaign for Climate Action (email)

CLIMATE CHANGE ACADEMICS (4)

- Bob Ward, London School of Economics (in person)
- Professor Katherine Rowan, George Mason University Centre for Climate Change Communication, Washington DC (email)
- Guy Pearce, Global Change Institute, University of Queensland, Australia (email)
- Matthew Lockwood, Institute of Public Policy Research, UK (telephone)

OTHER (2)

- Fiona Fox, UK Science Media Centre (telephone)
- Nic Newman, former head BBC New Media (in person)