



**Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.**  
Greening the Media

# World Leaders Decide How Hot the Planet Will Be

If the Paris climate conference is about political futures, we're doomed

Like 19

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In late November, atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide reached 400 parts per million (ppm). That's about 50 ppm above the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> that climatologists consider safe, and 80 ppm above the early 1960s. Human activity (primarily industry, agriculture, power generation, and transportation) has emitted enough CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases to cause the atmosphere to warm by 1 degree Celsius (about 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit) since the late 19th century. The effects include melting glaciers, rising sea levels, droughts, and ever more severe weather events, with increasing force and frequency. The planet continues to warm up.<sup>1</sup>

We've reached a tipping point: humans must curtail global warming, and urgently. So why isn't this happening?

There are many causes, most notably well-heeled/oiled companies that send misleading messages and buy politicians' attention. But part of the story is how the US media in particular frame atmospheric warming. Our journalism frequently practices a kind of slight of hand because it gives equal weight to opposing opinions, making the science of global warming just another voice among many. Add to this the need to have what journalists call a "news peg" and we get coverage that waits until catastrophe strikes before rolling out environmental headlines, experts, and polls.

In fairness, the issues are very complex. Journalists struggle like the rest of us to make sense of all the information and filter out nonsense and propaganda. And without the backing of their editorial bosses, there's very little professional incentive to dig deeper and provide the scientific, social, and cultural resources for people to make sense of the eco-crisis or develop a context for considered political action. In the end, reporters rely on what's already been said and storylines that are already familiar to the public.

There are certainly honorable exceptions, such as the *Los Angeles Times* refusing to print climate-change denial letters because they're, you know, crazy and wrong.<sup>2</sup> But the quantity and quality of environmental reporting at the *New York Times* collapsed dramatically when it axed its environmental beat in 2013 (a decision since revoked) and National Public Radio radically diminished the resources it allocates to the topic only last year.<sup>3</sup> It's noteworthy that reactionary and populist papers (*The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* respectively) have even more drastically failed the task of history in their under-reporting of environmental science.<sup>4</sup>

As we write, the 21st Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21) is underway in Paris. The mainstream US media have addressed it through a small number of storylines, split almost evenly between politics (a historic meeting of world leaders; a chance for Barack Obama to shape his legacy; respect for developing countries' demands; Republican reaction, and so on) and economics (green jobs; environmental threats to subsistence economies; renewable energy; and carbon taxes, caps, and trades).

While some stories highlight the sense of urgency that surrounds the Paris talks, this urgency still gives precedence to *Realpolitik* over climate science. And it is diminished by a rather cautious tone that has been struck by contrast to the early optimism that then had to confront the failures of the last COP, in Copenhagen.<sup>5</sup>

Negotiation has been the main media emphasis: Will consensus be found on CO<sub>2</sub> limits of 1.5 degrees Celsius, or will dissent expressed by Saudi Arabia or Venezuela push that number up to 2 degrees or higher? Will the draft agreement respect the rights of indigenous peoples? Will rich countries commit enough money to support mitigation efforts in poorer regions? Will fossil fuel interests be represented in the draft agreement?<sup>6</sup>

As of December 5, that draft ran to 48 pages and featured over 900 square brackets, signifying areas still not agreed by the parties.<sup>7</sup> The Like Minded Group of Developing Countries, led by China, India, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia, continue to insist that growth and development are legitimate priorities for them, and that nations with longer-standing wealth should bear the brunt of reducing emissions.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, back in the US, the Republican Party thunders and blunders on and on, insisting it will destroy any agreement Obama may sign.<sup>9</sup>

While the final outcome of the COP is impossible to predict, we'd like to see our media cover the influence peddled by power corporate players who are involved in the talks.

At the insistence of the UN climate chief, Christiana Figueres, business interests figure prominently on the agenda. The context for that decision is that 77 percent of *Fortune 500* companies have spent years lobbying the climate policy makers who are now attending COP21. Funding for the conference itself relied on corporate support in the tens of millions of dollars.<sup>10</sup>

Sponsors include BMW, Coca-Cola, and BT as well as "EDF Energy, Engie (which accounts for nearly half of France's annual carbon output), Air France (which has opposed emissions reductions in the aviation sector), and BNP Paribas (one of the top ten global coal lending banks during 2005-2013)."<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the scene at the conference has been likened to an industrial fair: national pavilions tout their country's soft power through displays of high-tech wonders and an eagerness to make green deals.<sup>12</sup>

Environmental activist Bill McKibben insists we set low expectations for COP21. For him, the Paris talks are akin to the scoreboard in a football game, and at the end of the Copenhagen COP, "the scoreboard read: Fossil Fuel Industry, 50; Planet and Physics, 0. Call that halftime. After Paris, the score will be more like 60-30. Reality is beginning to catch up, but it's not halftime anymore. We hope it's the end of the third quarter, but there's reason to believe it's actually much later in the game."<sup>13</sup>

Our ecological crisis requires a deep commitment to environmental justice based on scientific findings. The problem, which seems to be beyond the media's ken, is the underlying contradiction between the aims of environmental justice and the ruling *Realpolitik* that allows politicians to decide how much risk the planet and its inhabitants will endure and for how long.

It's a fight between planet saving and political face-saving, brokered behind closed doors and policed streets, with funding and agenda-setting courtesy of corporate interests. We deserve better from our media, and in this last week of discussion and beyond, reporters need to focus on the companies, whether they are in the shadows or the neon, that are working against the public interest.

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