

Self-regulation is not working to keep British media factual about climate change

Mar 15 2012

Scientists and social scientists working on climate change are increasingly concerned about the way in which the issue is reported in the UK national media.

Bob Ward argues that Britain's self-regulating press and weakly monitored broadcast outputs are unable to handle instances of blatant factual misrepresentation. As a result some media outlets can continuously fabricate controversy and denounce constructive environmental policies.



This is the first article in a [series on climate change and environmental policy](#) being hosted by [British Politics and Policy at LSE](#).

The [Leveson Inquiry](#) into the culture, practice and ethics of the press has mainly been focusing on issues arising from the alleged hacking of phones by journalists at some national newspapers. But the Inquiry would perform a great service for the public interest if it also investigates the way that some parts of the media are choosing to cover the issue of climate change.

There is unequivocal [scientific evidence](#) that the Earth is warming, and little real argument that the main cause is the indisputable increase in atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, due to human activities such as burning fossil fuels. The consensus view within the scientific community is that if greenhouse gas levels continue to rise unchecked, there are very clear risks of further global warming. This development could damage the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people across the world through changes in extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and other climatic impacts.

In the UK, we are already seeing the effects of climate change, with seven of the 10 warmest years on record all having occurred since 2001. The UK public can also see a range of positive policy responses from government, ranging from the growth of alternative energy sources to reduce emissions, to greater investment in sea and flood defences to prepare for those impacts of climate change that cannot now be avoided. Hence, climate change is a major public interest issue in the UK.

Many national newspapers and broadcasters are serving the public interest by covering both major developments in the understanding of the challenges posed by climate change and the options for overcoming them. But some parts of the media are failing their audiences, preferring instead to champion unscientific, or even anti-scientific, coverage of climate change.

Most national media frame climate change as an environmental issue, and primarily one of science, with a bit of politics and economics thrown in. News reporting of climate change is usually carried out by science reporters, or environment reporters who often have science degree backgrounds. By and large this reporting is of a high quality and avoids inaccurate and misleading information as required by the [Editors' Code of Practice](#) of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) in the case of newspapers, and by [Ofcom's Broadcasting Code](#) in the case of television and radio companies.

However, some parts of the media have exploited weaknesses in the regulatory systems to promote demonstrably inaccurate and misleading information to the public about the causes and potential consequences of climate change, often under the guise of achieving 'balance' in their coverage.

For instance, in March 2007, Channel 4 broadcast 'The Great Global Warming Swindle', a long programme that sought to convince viewers that a change in the activity of the Sun, rather than the increase in greenhouse gas concentrations, is responsible for rising global temperatures. The programme contained [numerous factual errors](#), as well as a [doctored graph](#). And it generated more than 250 complaints to the broadcasting regulator Ofcom, including one from me.

After a year of considering the complaints, Ofcom published [its ruling](#) in July 2008. It found that the programme has been unfair towards some scientists. But it refused to judge the inaccuracies in the programme to be a breach of the Broadcasting Code because it could find no evidence that they had "materially misled the audience so as to cause harm or offence". Ofcom acknowledged that the programme was "a polemic clearly going against the prevailing scientific view on global warming", but judged that "it is important, in line with freedom of expression, that broadcasters are able to challenge current orthodoxy". In essence, Ofcom decided that broadcasters can show documentaries and other 'factual' TV programmes that are factually inaccurate and mislead viewers, so long as they do not cause demonstrable harm or offence.

National newspapers are able to take advantage of a similar loophole in the PCC Editors' Code of Practice. In March 2009, *The Sunday Telegraph* [published a column](#) in which Christopher Booker reported the views of Dr Nils-Axel Mörner who claims that global sea level is not rising. I felt that the article contained numerous inaccuracies, so I wrote a letter to *The Sunday Telegraph* to correct them and later made a complaint to the PCC. After [a long exchange](#), the PCC finally [reached a verdict](#) in December 2009. It ruled that the newspaper had not breached the Editors' Code of Practice because in reporting Dr Mörner's comments 'its responsibility was for publishing his views accurately rather than for the accuracy of his views'.

In my view, the PCC decided that newspapers are permitted to publish inaccurate and misleading information, so long as it is opinion. This surprisingly lax interpretation of the Code, which treats the laws of physics as just 'a point of view', has allowed some newspapers to publish with impunity numerous inaccurate and misleading articles about climate change.

The *Daily Mail* is owned by a company that apparently [takes climate change seriously](#). Yet its systematically misleading coverage is part of a campaign against the UK government 'green' policies that was reportedly [agreed at a lunch](#) between Paul Dacre, the newspaper's editor, and Lord Lawson, the founder of the Global Warming Policy Foundation, a campaign group of global warming deniers.

There are indications that these systematic misrepresentations of the science of climate change are leaving many people grossly misinformed. The most recent [annual survey for the Department for Transport](#) found that nearly one in four of the UK public is not convinced that climate change is even happening. Let us hope that the Leveson Inquiry finds time to investigate how parts of the UK media are systematically harming the public interest through their climate change coverage.

Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

Bob Ward is Policy and Communications Director at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/grantham>).

You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. [The British Politics & Policy blog launches a new series on climate change and environmental policy](#)
2. [We need to provide the space for constructive debates on climate change. Ignoring climate](#)

scepticism won't make it go away

3. The phone-hacking scandals indicate that industry self regulation has failed to safeguard standards and accountability in the news media. A Media Commission is needed.
4. Climate change scepticism is largely social and not scientific in nature