

Miscommunicating science: the media and climate change

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*The public is being placed at a greater risk of harm from the impacts of climate change because of failures in communication by the media, as well as the government and the research community, writes **Bob Ward**. He supports his analysis based on [evidence](#) submitted to Parliament, and concludes that misleading and scientifically inaccurate arguments should not be routinely promoted in the media as ‘free speech’.*



The [evidence](#) I submitted to [an inquiry on science communication](#) by the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology states: “The vast over-representation of viewpoints from individuals and organisations that reject the scientific consensus may largely explain why such a large proportion of the public do not realise the extent of scientific consensus and hence do not share the conclusions of the consensus”.

For instance, [a survey](#) of a representative sample of British adults carried out by ComRes for the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit in September 2015 found that only 16 per cent agreed that “almost all”, with a further 45 per cent choosing “a majority of”, climate scientists “believe that climate change is mainly the results of human activities”. The survey also discovered that only 59 per cent agreed with the statement “Climate change is happening and is mainly caused by human activity”, while 28 per cent agreed that “Climate change is happening but human activity is not mainly responsible for it”.

And [the 17th wave](#) of the regular public attitudes tracking survey commissioned by the Department of Energy and Climate Change, which was carried out in March 2016, found that only 43 per cent of a representative sample of the UK public agreed that climate change is entirely or mainly caused by human activity, with a further 41 per cent stating that climate change is partly caused by natural processes and partly caused by human activity.

My submission draws attention to the fact that the results of these opinion polls are in stark contrast to the extremely strong consensus among scientists that climate change is happening. This is driven primarily by human activities, and poses severe risks if unmanaged, as documented through the conclusions in 2014 of [the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#). This is also supported by numerous surveys of peer-reviewed papers – including [Professor James Powell’s analysis](#) earlier this year – the verdicts of national science academies of major scientific institutions around the world, including [a joint publication](#) by the UK’s Royal Society and the United States National Academy of Sciences.



My submission to the Committee draws attention to the fact that the majority of the UK's national newspapers have adopted editorial lines on climate change that, to varying extents, promote the views of climate change 'sceptics'. While the editorial line can often be detected in the choice and style of news stories about climate change, it is often more obvious in the commentaries that are published. Geoffrey Lean, the former environment correspondent of *The Daily Telegraph*, [has drawn attention to](#) the disproportionate number of columnists for UK newspapers who reject the scientific consensus on climate change.

This was clearly demonstrated last month after a group of peers, including Lord Stern, the Chair of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment and the ESRC Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy, wrote [a letter](#) to the editor of *The Times* to highlight the damage he is causing to the newspaper's reputation by promoting climate change denial. In response, Viscount Ridley, the hereditary peer and former Chair of Northern Rock bank [accused](#) the authors of the letter of trying to "shut down debate about the science of climate change".

This defensive tactic adopted by Viscount Ridley and fellow campaigners at [the Global Warming Policy Foundation](#), [such as Charles Moore](#), not only misrepresents the concept of press freedom, but also tries to obscure how unscientific and intellectually feeble the arguments of climate change 'sceptics' really are. Yet newspapers are supposed to be bound by the [Editors' Code of Practice](#), which states: "The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text".

However, this self-regulation is [routinely disregarded](#) by those who allow demonstrably false information to be disseminated to the public, apparently on the grounds that claims – not matter how demonstrably inaccurate and misleading – can be classified as 'a point of view'. Moreover, the modern scientific method is based on exposing claims to the rigorous test of experimentation and observation, and those that fail are allowed to die. Climate change 'sceptics' have been shown over and over again to be wrong about the science, as well as the economics and politics, yet they demand that their zombie arguments should be allowed to live on for the sake of 'free speech'.

It is time for the press, especially those that champion the views of climate change 'sceptics', to put the interests of their readers first.

About the Author

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