

Parliamentary Inquiry into Science Reporting: Where are the Sceptics?

*The issue of science reporting, brought up in the Leveson Inquiry's report on the ethics and behaviour of the press, seemed forgotten as politicians focused on replacing the PCC. Now, MPs are looking into this issue that **Nicholas Robin** argues evidence shows is considerable problem in the British Press.*



While media attention will be focused on the grilling that the BBC's former director general, Mark Thompson, and Trust Chairman, Lord Patten, will get from the Public Accounts Committee in Parliament today, another aspect of media conduct will be discussed on the committee corridor that is arguably more important than redundancy payouts at the BBC.

At 4.30pm today, 9 September, MPs will also hear evidence from current and former environment correspondents – at *The Guardian*, *The FT*, *The Times* and *The Independent* – on how media reporting of climate change affects public understanding of the issue. The hearings (**which can be watched on the Parliament website**) will take place as part of **an inquiry by the cross-party Science and Technology Select Committee**, examining how Government Departments and publicly funded scientists communicate climate science, as well as the role the media play in influencing public opinion on climate change.

The inquiry comes at a time when some UK newspapers are taking a more sceptical editorial position on climate change in apparent opposition to mainstream scientific opinion. **Research by the Reuters institute** has shown that between 2007 and 2010 there was an increase in the number of articles and opinion pieces in UK print media citing voices sceptical of the scientific consensus on climate change.

The growth in sceptical commentary seems to reflect the increasing media presence of lobby groups opposed to action on climate change, like the **Global Warming Policy Foundation**, rather than any change in the position of the UK's leading climate scientists on the evidence linking rising global temperatures to an increase in greenhouse gases. Indeed, **a paper published in May 2013 by John Cook et al**, that analysed the abstracts of 11 944 peer-reviewed papers on climate science, found that 97 per cent agreed with the view that it is highly probable that the observed rise in global temperatures is largely due to human activities.

The undue weight apparently being given to climate sceptics by certain sections of the press seems to confirm **concerns raised by Lord Justice Leveson about inaccuracies in the reporting of scientific issues** like the MMR vaccine and climate change. The Leveson report pointed out that although mistakes were inevitable, problems of overt politicization, sensationalism, exaggeration and the presentation of false balance were particularly evident in climate science reporting. He concluded that there existed *'a cultural strand of tendency within a section of the press to practice journalism, which on occasion is deliberately, recklessly or negligently inaccurate.'*

These concerns have been echoed in **evidence to the Commons inquiry** from **Carbon Brief**, a daily blog that analyses and fact checks media reports on climate change. It argues that some UK coverage of climate science is *'confused or misleading'* and does not represent *'scientific understanding or scientific debates accurately'*. It warned that climate change coverage has become politicised *'to some degree'* and that *'scientific uncertainty can be over-stressed to cast doubt on areas of climate science where there is broad scientific agreement'*.

Even more forthright in raising concerns about politicized coverage of climate change has been the Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Ed Davey **MP**. **In a**

recent speech at the UK Met Office – which has itself faced attacks from the press for its predictions on climate change – earlier this year, he said: “some sections of the press are giving an uncritical campaigning platform to individuals and lobby groups who reject, outright, the fact that climate change is a result of human activity. Some who even deny the reality of climate change itself. This is not the serious science of challenging, checking and probing. This is destructive and loudly clamouring scepticism born of vested interest, nimbyism, publicity seeking contraversialism or sheer blinkered, dogmatic, political bloody-mindedness.”

The accusation that climate reporting has been politicized seems to be borne out by the Reuters research that showed there was a correlation between the political perspective of a newspaper and its reporting of climate science. It found that right leaning newspapers like *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express* were more likely to cite sceptical commentators than left-leaning or liberal papers like *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mirror* or *The Independent*.

Given the apparent split along political lines in the stance of different papers on climate change, it is noteworthy that only journalists from *The Guardian* and *The Independent* are giving evidence to Parliament today. One could presume that newspapers like *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*, known to take a more sceptical position on climate change, were also invited to attend. Did they decline to defend their editorial position on climate science?

Sensationalized stories in national and regional papers, that gave undue weight to science linking the MMR vaccine with autism, have been blamed for recent outbreaks of measles and mumps among the hundreds of thousands of young people who were not immunized as a result of the media scare. Could politicized and inaccurate reporting of climate science cause even bigger public policy problems by distorting the debate on climate change?

It will be interesting to hear what the journalists have to say. First up are Guardian Assistant Environment Editor, James Randerson, and Catherine Brahi, news editor at *New Scientist*. Guardian Environment Correspondent, Fiona Harvey, who performed the same role at *The FT* between 2004-2011, will follow alongside Lewis Smith who was the Environment and Science Reporter at *The Times* between 2006-2009 and now writes for *The Independent*.

This article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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