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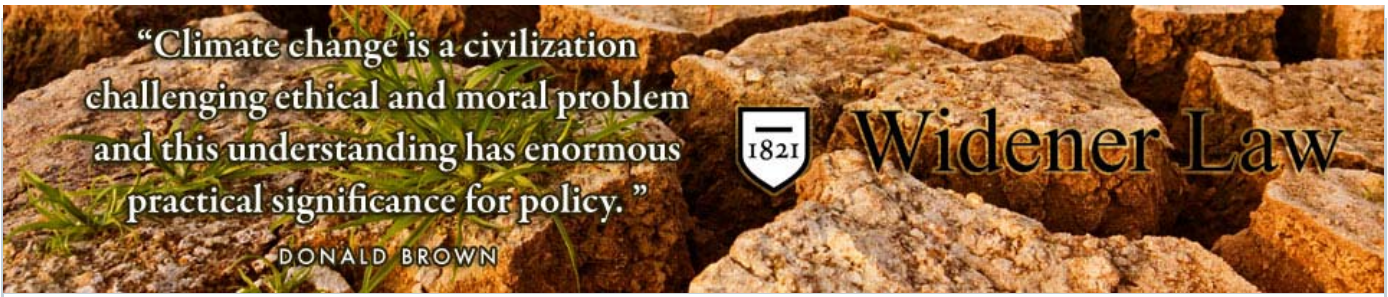
Five Grave Communications Failures of the US Media On Climate Change

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Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



Five Grave Communications Failures of the US Media On Climate Change-The Failure To Communicate The Strength of The Scientific Consensus

I. Introduction

The US media has utterly failed to communicate to the American people about five essential aspects of climate change that they need to understand to know why climate change is a civilization challenging problem that requires dramatic, aggressive, and urgent policy action to avoid harsh impacts to hundreds of millions of people around the world. EthicsandClimate.org has recently developed a video on these failures entitled: ***Five Grave Communication Failures of US Media On Climate Change***

We now provide a more detailed written description of these failures in this and subsequent posts. In this post we look at the first of these communications failures, namely the failure to communicate to US citizens the strength and nature of the current scientific consensus position on climate change.

Subsequent posts will examine the following additional communication failures of the US media:

- The magnitude of greenhouse gas emissions reductions that are necessary to prevent dangerous climate change.
- The consistent barrier that the United States has been in finding a global solution on climate change for over 20 years.
- The fact that climate change must be understood as a civilization challenging ethical problem, an understanding that is of profound significance for climate change policy formation.
- The nature of the climate change disinformation campaign in the United States.

II. The Strength And Nature Of The Current Scientific Consensus Position On Climate Change.

Most US citizens are aware that there has been an ongoing debate about the science of climate change, yet most American are completely unaware of the strength of the "consensus" position on climate change.

The consensus position is understood to be that which has been articulated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The IPCC was established by

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the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in 1988 to assess for governments the scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant for the understanding of climate change, and to identify its potential impacts and options for adaptation and mitigation. (IPCC, 2010) The IPCC does not do original research but synthesizes and summarizes the extant peer-reviewed climate change science to make recommendations for governments and policy makers. (IPCC, 2010a) The consensus position is not the consensus on all scientific issues entailed by climate change. Yet, the consensus position has the following elements:

- *The planet is warming*
- *The observable warming is very likely mostly caused by human activities*
- *Under business as unusual human-induced warming will likely range from 2 to 5 degrees C (although it could be greater). This warming will harm some people more than others from rising seas, increased droughts and floods, increased storms, increased vector-borne disease, deaths from heat waves, reducing food productivity, and diminished availability to water.*
- *To stabilize GHG in the atmosphere will require huge reductions from business as usual.*

There are several strong reasons why the "consensus" view is entitled to respect including the following:

One, recent reports have concluded that the vast majority of scientists actually doing research in the field support the consensus scientific view.

For example, a 2009 study–published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States–polled 1,372 climate researchers and resulted in the following two conclusions.

> *(i) 97-98% of the climate researchers most actively publishing in the field support the tenets of ACC (Anthropogenic Climate Change) outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and*
>
> *(ii) The relative climate expertise and scientific prominence of the researchers unconvinced of ACC are substantially below that of the convinced researchers.*
>
> *(Anderegga et. al 2010)*

Another poll performed in 2009 of 3,146 of the known 10,257 Earth scientists concluded that 76 out of 79 climatologists who "listed climate science as their area of expertise and who also have published more than 50% of their recent peer-reviewed papers on the subject of climate change" believe that mean global temperatures have risen compared to pre-1800s levels, and 75 out of 77 believe that human activity is a significant factor in changing mean global temperatures. (Doran and Zimmerman, 2009)

Two, in response to arguments from some climate change skeptics, many scientific organizations with expertise relevant to climate change have endorsed the consensus position that "most of the global warming in recent decades can be attributed to human activities" including the following:• American Association for the Advancement of Science• American Astronomical Society• American Chemical Society• American Geophysical Union• American Institute of Physics• American Meteorological Society• American Physical Society• Australian Coral Reef Society• Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society• Australian Bureau of Meteorology and the CSIRO• British Antarctic Survey• Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences• Canadian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society• Environmental Protection Agency• European Federation of Geologists• European Geosciences Union• European Physical Society• Federation of American Scientists• Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies•

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Geological Society of America• Geological Society of Australia• International Union for Quaternary Research (INQUA)• International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics• National Center for Atmospheric Research• National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration• Royal Meteorological Society• Royal Society of the UK

(Skeptical Science, 2010)

Three, the Academies of Science from nineteen different countries all endorse the consensus view. Eleven countries have signed a joint statement endorsing the consensus position.They are:• Academia Brasiliera de Ciencias (Brazil)• Royal Society of Canada• Chinese Academy of Sciences• Academie des Sciences (France)• Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina (Germany)• Indian National Science Academy• Accademia dei Lincei (Italy)• Science Council of Japan• Russian Academy of Sciences• Royal Society (United Kingdom)• National Academy of Sciences (USA)

(Skeptical Science, 2010):

Among the academies of sciences around the world that have issued reports supporting the consensus view is the United States Academy of Sciences that has issued four reports.

From this it can be seen that the consensus view articulated by the IPCC is strongly supported by: (1) the vast majority of climate change scientists that actually do research on human-induced climate change (2) the most prestigious scientific organizations comprised of scientists with relevant climate change expertise, and (3) academies of sciences around the world, the very institutions that have been created to advise governments on complex scientific issues. For this reason, the IPCC consensus position is entitled to strong respect that, at the very minimum, climate change poses a legitimate significant threat to human well-being and the natural resources on which life depends.

In fact, some critics have contended that the IPCC reports tend to underestimate climate change dangers and risks because the process that leads to the IPCC conclusions give representatives from countries that have consistently opposed the adoption of international climate regimes power to pressure the IPCC scientists to report only the lowest common denominator. (For a discussion of the limits of IPCC, see, Brown, 2008) In fact observations of actual greenhouse gas atmospheric concentrations, temperatures, and sea level rise are near or exceeding the IPCC worst-case predictions. One recent comparison of greenhouse gas concentrations, temperatures, and sea-level rise observations versus predictions concluded:

> *Overall, these observational data underscore the concerns about global climate change. Previous projections, as summarized by the IPCC, have not exaggerated but may in some respects even have underestimated the climate changes that have been observed. (Rahmstorf et al., 2007)*

It is important as a mater of ethics to remember that if the consensus view is wrong, it could be wrong in two directions. That is, not only could IPCC be overstating the magnitude and timing of climate change in the future, they may be understating the harshness of climate change harms.

And so, the most prestigious scientific organizations in the world support the consensus view on climate change. Yet. the United States media has almost always failed to communicate this fact when discussing controversies about climate change science. Although the US media has from time to time acknowledged that most climate scientists support the consensus view, they have almost always failed to describe strength of the consensus view that becomes apparent when one understands the magnitude of support for the consensus view by the most prestigious scientific organizations end researchers described above.

Given the enormity and harshness of impacts to hundreds of millions of people around the world from climate change coupled with the fact that United States has a

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special responsibility for the civilization challenging problem because of the comparatively large levels of the emissions coming from America, the failure of the US media to describe strength the scientific consensus on change is a grave and tragic error.

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October 20, 2012 at 2:16 am 2 comments Donald A. Brown

2 Responses

John van Boxel says:

You State: “The IPCC was established by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in 1988 …”.
However it was the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), not the WHO who cofounded IPCC. Please correct.

Tags

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(see http://www.ipcc.ch/organization/organization.shtml#.UKojeGdb2Hs)

November 19, 2012 at 12:18 pm Reply

Donald A. Brown says:

Thanks, for the correction

November 19, 2012 at 3:01 pm Reply

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