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OPINION | FREE EXPRESSION

Climate Change Has Consumed Journalistic Standards

Reporters used to be hard-bitten skeptics. Now they aspire to be part of the authoritative expert class.



By

[Gerard Baker](#)

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A firefighter battling a wildfire in southern Oregon, July 15.

PHOTO: US FOREST SERVICE HANDOUT/SHUTTERSTOCK

‘Is this the end of summer as we’ve known it?’ a [New York Times](#) headline asked the other day, with characteristic hysteria. (It’s an old truth in journalism circles: when a newspaper headline asks a question, the answer is almost always no: “Has This Man Found a Cure for Baldness? Are We All Going to Be Vegans? Is This the Start of a New Era for the Jets?”)

In this case the self-evidently refutable proposition framed as a question was prompted by the summer of meteorologically fraught

events we've been experiencing: record temperatures and wildfires, droughts and ocean surges, wild storms and flash flooding. Just when we were looking forward to a well-earned summer of escape from the misery of the last 18 months, forget it: Climate change means fire and brimstone forever.

It's been noted elsewhere that in the modern media's received taxonomy, we don't have weather anymore. We have climate. Specifically, man-made climate change.

We used to have weather. A cursory knowledge of human history suggests extreme weather events did not arrive in the few short years since the saintly Greta Thunberg became incarnate. The Bible is full of them. Herodotus tells us that the massive Persian fleet sent to conquer Greece lost half its ships to a freak storm before it met its fate at the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C. In 1935 flooding of the Yangtze River in China killed as many as half a million people.

But in the annals of modern journalism we stopped having weather around 1999. Now all we have in our skies, rivers, seas and forests are episodes that confirm climate change.

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It's extremely hot: Climate change. It's extremely cold: Climate change. It's raining a little: Climate change.

With the definitive affirmation comes the lurid panic followed by the stern lecture: The Earth is going to combust (or drown, or freeze, or starve—the science isn't fully settled on that yet). And it's all our fault. Specifically, it's all Americans' fault for driving SUVs,

cranking up the air conditioning and refusing to become vegetarian. How can we expect the Chinese to stop building 50 coal-fired power stations a month if those Republican-voting rubes in Missouri insist on eating hamburgers?

Be ready for much more of this in the coming weeks after the publication Monday of the update by the United Nations International Panel on Climate Change in advance of the so-called COP 26 meeting in the U.K. in November. You will scarcely hear a dissenting voice as the monolithic media faithful echoes every frightening forecast from the scientists whose livelihoods depend on maintaining the highest level of alarm.

My beef here isn't mainly with climate extremism itself. I'm no climate scientist: I'm confident the planet is warming and that evasive action would be smart. I'm less confident that a spate of historically familiar extreme weather events constitutes proof that we're all going to burn in the next decade or that the answer lies only in the most drastic government-mandated responses, which the media will insist we must immediately adopt. Better-informed writers on these pages have put the case for a more measured judgment and approach. "Unsettled: What Climate Science Tells Us, What It Doesn't, and Why It Matters," a recent book by Steven E. Koonin, a scientist and former Obama administration official, provides an elegant rebuttal to much of the extremism.

My concern is with the way these topics are now almost universally reported by the news media. "Reported" is a misnomer. They aren't facts; they are sacred revealed truths, unchallengeable arguments invested with epistemic certainty and moral clarity.

Journalism is no longer about trying to tell us what happened; it's about telling us what we must believe, on pain of moral peril. On every major topic—climate, Covid, race relations, electoral law—almost every story blares out at us with censorious didacticism, the journalist's smug disdain for the unbelievers poring through the prose.

News stories are not really covered in the old sense these days. The editors and reporters simply cull from the innumerable events around them those that fit the prevailing narrative and make sure they include a healthy dose of moral prescription.

In its heyday journalism demanded skepticism and curiosity. The good reporter doubted whatever he was told, even what time it was. He'd weigh competing accounts and explanations and actively seek out alternative versions. Read the bios of great reporters from the past and they'll be scattered with adjectives like ornery and insubordinate.

The modern journalist is different. His primary ambition is to be part of the expert class, to identify as a member of the cultural elite, happily swaddled in all their shared nostrums. He's most content when he's wagging a finger at the selfish fools who continue to doubt climate extremism, express skepticism about vaccines, or deny their innate white sinfulness.

His virtue thus signaled, he luxuriates in the knowledge that he's on the side of the chosen ones. It's just a pity it's no longer journalism.

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