The consensus within the scientific community that climate change/global warming (CC/GW) is real, imminent, indeed currently ongoing, and largely induced by human activities is practically unanimous.1 Despite this, R.J. Lazarus termed it a “super-wicked problem.”2 Generally speaking politics and law in the United States systematically eschew policies that favor the collective needs of the global future over the national present. The inherent complexity, scale, and local variability of CC/GW require a governmental response, not simply change in the private sector, and that inter-generational consequences be taken into account. It is little wonder, then, that climate change policy has repeatedly encountered roadblocks.3 Even when incremental progress can be achieved, it fails to address the urgency and timeliness that action to combat CC/GW requires. Indeed, how one defines timeliness depends on a host of factors, which makes motivating collective action inherently difficult. Broadly speaking, it is democracy and democratic institutions that have been tasked with tackling societal problems like these in America. The state of democracy and its relationship to the media are the subjects of this essay. The great debate between John Dewey4 and Walter Lippmann5 over the prospects for democracy in the 1920s may hold clues to our current predicament. Dewey believed that participatory democracy lives and dies upon a citizenry engaged in unfettered decision making. Dewey reasoned that democratic citizens would learn through participation whether outcomes were optimal or not. A free press was vital in maintaining such a critical and informed public—one not easily cajoled into decisions against their interests. The free press thus prevented elite influence-peddling, manipulation, and the domination of specific interests over the public interest. Elites have no inherent relationship to beneficence, wisdom, or the national interest, and curtailing their undue power was therefore inherent to democratic ideals. Constitutional protections of the free press represent a strong legal foundation to build on.

Lippmann thought otherwise. He believed that upholding democracy across a large population on a large land mass necessitated informed elites guiding laypeople toward effective policies. Lippmann disregarded the public’s potential to remain adequately informed on increasingly technical bodies of knowledge, considering their perspectives to be stereotypical representations of elite cues. Thus the hopes of democracy rested on rigorous technocratic structures whereby expertise was emphasized in public dissemination of knowledge. Through this, democracy would be efficacious without losing its participatory ethos. Lippmann was not a cynic, but he felt Dewey’s faith in iterative mass-learning to be both idealistic and romanticized. He maintained that the media was best used as a framing device.

Importantly, both Dewey and Lippmann lamented the state of the media in their time: it had become unduly fragmented and was ill equipped to the democrat- ic functions that each of these thinkers had mapped out for it. Dewey was concerned at the media’s devolution into local hegemons practicing agenda framing; Lippmann was concerned with a localization process that rendered large-scale dissemination unintelligible to the citizenry.

One hundred years on, Lazarus’s observed fragmentation, too. Time, geography, socioeconomics, and other factors currently refract legislative emphases regarding CC/GW amongst the grassroots, rendering both elites and the general public unable to agree upon, let alone enact, solutions. Indeed, CC/GW does not really have a “solution” per se; it calls instead for
a series of deployments and alterations in technology, behaviors, politics and philosophies, with no guaranteed outcomes. The nature of the problem, I would argue, precludes its being reasoned to a broad, ideal conclusion, and indeed many strands of environmentalist thought have abandoned such skeleton-key aspirations and approaches. The technical elites whom Lippmann looked to for democratic governance are manifestly failing, while Dewey’s puritanical devotion to the democratic foot soldier has taken on an inverted rationale. For him, individual actions at the grassroots level formed “publics” on behalf of the common good of the nation, while climate change impresses upon us the fact that our every action can potentially contribute to the destruction of the global commons. The hearts and minds of the citizenry are the ultimate placeholder in our fate by dint of this observation alone. Over enough time, all of us are equal stakeholders in CC/GW, ideological and personal beliefs be damned.

CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL

Climate change denialism is, broadly, the practice of denying or minimizing the existence of CC/GW, its anthropogenic roots, or its severity. It stems from a campaign of disinformation waged by conservative and corporate interests who stand to lose money and power if CC/GW is addressed holistically. These coalesced interests include big industries indelibly tied to greenhouse gases, conservative foundations, and the media.

Frederick Singer and Frederick Seitz, prominent Cold War nuclear physicists and noted military-industrialists, spearheaded this disinformation campaign. Publicly regarded as both patriots and geniuses, they used their Ivy League reputations to publicly cast doubt on the CC/GW consensus emerging from the wider scientific community, despite scant scholarly engagement. This technique originated with Big Tobacco, who obfuscated the association between cigarette smoking and lung cancer by purchasing endorsements from prestigious academic and scientific figures, oncological expertise optional. By overemphasizing uncertainties inherent in the scientific method and using complexity as a smokescreen, these disinformation campaigns proved very effective. Critical to this effort was a compliant media.

CC/GW has become indelibly tied to political division between the left and the right in the United States. People of a Republican/conservative persuasion are generally less likely to invest in the scientific consensus that CC/GW is occurring, anthropogenically induced, and likely to be harmful to humans. This divide was not always so. Richard Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. While campaigning for president in 1988, George H.W. Bush promised to use the “White House effect” to counteract the “greenhouse effect,” aka, climate change. But a trend of increasing partisanship, particularly negative partisanship, has been evident in U.S. society since the 1970s, and this is embodied by the intractable gridlock environmental legislation routinely experiences in Congress. A good example is the shameless championing of Michael Crichton’s anti-environmentalist novel *State of Fear* by noted climate change denier Senator Jim Inhofe (R-Oklahoma), transforming a work of fiction into a supporting policy document for the U.S. Senate’s Public Environment and Public Works Committee. This disingenuousness, in addition to being flabbergasting, is difficult to reconcile with Lippmann’s sympathetic view on the role of elites in guard-railing democratic outcomes.

Studies indicate that self-identified liberals are more likely to agree with scientific consensus than self-identified conservatives, and that education level or self-reported knowledge has little alignment with faith in science amongst conservatives. An analysis of conservative think tanks revealed they consider evidence for CC/GW to be weak, warming to be potentially beneficial, and active amelioration of the problem as causing more harm than good. Political persu-
sion has been shown to be a better predictor of attitudes towards CC/GW than extreme weather events or education level. Republicans have been shown to evidence a stronger anticipated confirmation bias to news selection—i.e., a stronger desire to listen to information sources with which they expect to agree. Conservatives have less trust in scientists and less faith in scientific models. They prefer the term “global warming” to “climate change” because the perception of colder weather in some areas appears to refute it. Adding to this, climate scientists tend to minimize their findings, presumably in response to the public brutality some in the field, such as Ben Santer, have been subjected to.

The media functions as a filter for the flow of information into society. Speaking constitutionally, the First Amendment broadly protects the press from state interference and censorship so as to better inform the populace and enable democratic debate, even at the expense of tolerating demagoguery. The sensationalist excesses of yellow journalism around the turn of the twentieth century summoned the energies for both Dewey’s and Lippmann’s ideas on the role of the media, as the commercial and prejudicial side of journalism was driven to hyperbolic extremes. A fixation with scandal and appeals to gossip over substance drew out an extensive debate on the difference between news and entertainment for the first time; and these ghosts have never fully left us—the line between academic theories concerning social constructivism and evolving communications styles and journalistic practices is as blurred today, if not more so, than it was a century ago.

Indeed, today we are in another period of seismic change for the media. After having relied for years on the print media and the nightly news on ABC, CBS and NBC, twenty-four-hour cable news, the Internet, and mobile platforms have quickly changed the way the United States receives its information. The prevalence and breadth of new media have fostered an increasingly competitive marketplace. Outlets have responded by identifying and defending increasingly narrow niches, deliberately addressing viewers of a specific ideological persuasion to cultivate an echo-chamber for pre-existing knowledge and opinions, dubbed “selective exposure.” A reticence in the media for communicating complexity effectively further obstructs accurate public understanding, instead offering discrete ideological buckets. Complex information is filtered through the lens of organizational ideology, which selects certain facts out of a vast pool whilst rejecting others. Consumers then herd into whatever bucket fits neatest, refining any nuance by using personal ideology as a guide.

The result is systemic misunderstandings, individuated to the extent that generalized critiques are vulnerable to be cherry-picked apart. The media norm of balanced bias (sometimes called false equivalence) contributes to uncertainty regarding climate science, too. This norm involves giving equal coverage to both “sides” of the issue. It therefore tends to elevate minority viewpoints to a roughly equitable standing with majority ones. This is incongruent with the pursuit of objective truth, but since post-yellow journalism culturally appropriated quasi-fictitious reporting, this apparently subtler miscommunication became commonplace. Staggeringly, 69 percent of TV news segments on CC/GW between 1995 and 2004 exhibited balanced bias. Studies of Twitter feeds show binary media narratives like these are passed on to regional social networking conversations. Conservative states have shown a higher prevalence of CC/GW hoax frames than liberal states, for example.

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CLIMATE COVERAGE

As an Englishman, the self-branding, bomb-throwing ideologue modern American politics seems to promote has always drawn my gaze. The closest analogy I can draw is to the grim curiosity with which I would use a stick to poke roadkill as a child (luckily, Nigel
Farage has come to satisfy this curiosity of late). As such, one project I undertook in graduate school was a content analysis of broadcast transcripts from Fox News and CNN dedicated to covering CC/GW.

My curiosity piqued at two questions. First, how does coverage of CC/GW vary across the titans of right-wing and centrist political cable news? Second, how did this coverage change across the Bush and Obama presidencies, given the respective shifts in political emphases generally, and climate politicking specifically? The dataset was accordingly bounded from 2001 to 2016. It eventually distilled down to eleven core code families, three of which had meaningfully divergent sub-divisions. Case in point: the “debate” frame, which captured instances portraying CC/GW as an inconclusive phenomenon. Within this frame were two distinctions—debate over the mere existence of CC/GW, and debate over the anthropogenic nature of CC/GW.

Some notable highlights of my study were as follows. CNN was roughly four times as likely as Fox during the Bush years to embed their CC/GW reporting in discussions of physical, ecological consequences like ice melt, wildfires, or hurricanes. Of these physical consequences, those related to ice, water, and sea level were easily the most common, presumably for the logical and linear explanation they provide. However, as the Obama era took hold, utilization of this frame plummeted to a mere 50 percent increase over Fox.

At the same time, CNN’s coverage doubled down on both “debate” frames when compared to their Bush-era coverage. CNN actually framed CC/GW as a debate more regularly than Fox in this period! Yet this directly contrasted with CNN’s consistent portrayal of CC/GW as a temporally proximal threat across both presidencies, approximately four times as intensively as Fox. Similarly, both broadcasters were equally inclined to frame CC/GW in conspiratorial, agenda-setting terms. Fox almost exclusively considered such conspiring to be liberal in origin and alarmist in nature, whereas CNN placed conspiratorial accusations at the foot of the climate denialists approximately 40 percent of the time, with the remaining 60 percent going toward the alarmists. Regardless, this ephemeral, shadowy messaging doubled in regularity during the Obama years for both broadcasters. Perhaps least surprisingly, CNN did provide clear, concise factual explanations of CC/GW-related phenomena no less than twenty times as often as Fox per broadcast.

A higher level view of the data is as follows: Fox’s coverage was heavily dominated by frames skeptical of CC/GW in some way, approximately twice as often as neutral frames, and approximately five times as often as frames saliently advocating for the cause. The number of mentions per segment in all categories rose marginally from Bush to Obama. CNN was more evenly spread, with advocacy and neutral frames occurring approximately thirteen times per broadcast, and skeptical ones closer to ten, during the Bush years. However, its coverage showed a sharp increase of roughly 50 percent in both neutral and skeptical frames during the Obama years, while advocacy frames dropped by roughly two instances per broadcast.

Television is not the predominant news platform any more, and today many are cutting the cord. Yet the sway that cable news retains in modern politics is undeniable. Donald Trump seems to conceptualize his policy perspectives, and perhaps the zeitgeist, from ruminations on Fox & Friends. CNN, by contrast, is a frequent victim of Trump’s harshest critiques. Regardless, these outlets are retaining a kind of totemic significance beyond the descriptive reaches of viewer-ship statistics. So with that, I offer some observations.

Whether through selective exposure, the compelling argument mechanism, direct persuasion models, or conservative/liberal receptivity discrepancies, loyal and extended exposure to politically charged media has the ability to form and exaggerate certain perspectives on an issue, including CC/GW. The data portrays CNN as having reactive, contradictory mes-
saging, whereas the rhetorical strategy and political identity of Fox is both more focused and ferocious. Research has indicated that the relationship between attitudes and behavior becomes stronger as those attitudes become more extreme in nature.\textsuperscript{33} Fox wins on two fronts here—it has better directed messaging and its fire-starting character more efficiently translates into action. Fox might exhibit flagrant bias, and almost entirely avoid addressing substantive elements of CC/GW, but its efficaciousness is only heightened by these facts. Crucially, Fox does not shirk the issue—in fact its coverage is extensive for a topic it doesn’t believe in—and this compunction seemingly enhances its perceived integrity.

If the Trump era has taught us anything, it is that the battle for media influence rests in monopolizing attention and placing messaging ideology before reality. Fox is, in truth, masterful at this. Consider the utterly committed, yet arbitrary coverage it has provided of Al Gore, who took the unfortunate step of travelling by private jet while advocating for reducing everyday fossil fuel use: “Every year the sky continues not to fall, it probably is more likely their movement will fall apart. ...What he [Al Gore] demands we do? Of course not, Bob. We do not qualify for the messiah exemption.”\textsuperscript{34}

The biblical, sanctimonious rhetoric will doubtless be unsurprising to those familiar with Fox. Jonathan Haidt’s work has indicated this stimulates the moral psychology of conservatives better than liberals.\textsuperscript{35} Next, consider this myopic, play-dumb kind of folk analysis when trying to obfuscate the complex connection between local weather and global climatic shifts:

The Senator recently said this about global warming, quote, “Climate change is very real. Now global warming creates volatility and I feel it when I’m flying. The storms, they’re more volatile.” You feel it? You’ve got to be kidding me. Is this how desperate these global warming alarmists have gotten? They’re not just leaning on their faulty scientific data any more. They’re just making stuff up.\textsuperscript{36}

By contrast, in moments of attempted gravitas, CNN regularly used melting ice as a demonstrative tool for the impact of CC/GW. This has great explanatory power. However, melting ice is an abstracted idea relegated to places so cold that humans don’t tend to settle there in large numbers. Melting ice, in real time, is also difficult to observe. This contributes to the average American’s normal experience of CC/GW as indirect, abstract, and delivered by perceived experts on television.\textsuperscript{37} This, in my estimation, is why CNN (and they were not alone in this) attempted to drum up further emotional resonance for the cause by focusing on the plight of the polar bear. But abstraction, unfortunately, endures: “They are getting thinner and thinner and thinner. And so, instead of having two or three cubs a year, they’re now having one and zero.”\textsuperscript{38}

Is climate change a liberal scheme? Are conservatives plotting to undermine credible science? Conspiratorial frames littered the data, always to the detriment of truth. Speaking as an outsider once more, I’ve observed a culture of cover-ups and scandal that seems to provide the lifeblood for post-rationalization in the United States. The rise of these frames during the Obama years was notable, perhaps appropriately so. After all, the bitter relationship between Obama and Trump is predicated, many believe, by the birth certificate conspiracy that Trump fueled and Obama’s subsequent mockery of Trump at the White House correspondents’ dinner.

Fox seems to provide soft landings for the ideologically rigid—another ghost of yellow journalism in need of exorcism. It skillfully deploys this strategy: “I think that the press has grown accustomed to covering this annual event as people are accustomed to exploiting it, and what’s happened is Earth Day has, for both media and the mainstream world, have become a kind of victim of its own success or a—it’s now a big business.”\textsuperscript{39}

Additionally, the producers, directors, reporters, and guest commentators on Fox are masterful in turn-
ing minority perspectives into righteous ones. They tap directly into the frontiersman fantasy of American life—the rugged, individual striding west—while simultaneously stimulating proximal sensibilities of conspiracy and cover-up. Exceptional people are by definition the minority, and Fox is an unapologetic mouthpiece for this brand of unsubstantiated American exceptionalism. The contrast with the creed of balance adopted by CNN is acute. CNN was so intent to appear neutral that it employed Glenn Beck for three years to provide politically alternative viewpoints, thereby “balancing” its anchor roster. And, boy, did he deliver, in his inimitable brand of unhinged semantics in monologues and pseudo-dialogues like this one in response to news that Al Gore intended to launch a three-year bipartisan mass persuasion campaign: “A mass persuasion campaign. Wow. That doesn’t sound creepy at all, Goebbels. You know what I mean?”40

Writing in 2018, I am aware of the delicious irony contained in the condemnation of liberal politicians by associating them with Nazism. The personnel at Fox, by contrast, had much greater ideological consistency, leaning heavily on think-tank fellows and representatives indelibly tied to what Robert Brulle calls the “climate change counter-movement.”41

A FEW CONCLUSIONS

Taking a moderated, balanced perspective is a norm that has endured in journalism, but its usefulness has eroded. Following the Federal Communication Commission’s 1987 ruling that media outlets were not obliged to refrain from obviously partisan commentary, conservative talk radio started a runaway trend of ephemeral dog whistling. Our splintered, granular media landscape now rewards the squeakiest wheel, and a hypercompetitive economic ecosystem ensures that the quiet ones do not survive long. Balance has become both a flawed norm for drawing meaningful conclusions and for retaining ears and eyes.

The public rises and falls by the information provided to them by the media, but today these institutions are content to sate and to sensate. Lippmann’s concern for the unregulated media was broadly well founded, but his belief that elites are best equipped to moderate these institutions appears laughable. Today’s American elites are radical, insurgent, and decoupled from the nation state. Lippmann’s misty-eyed vision of an informed elite is presently a selectively marginalized population of scientists and policy actors drawn upon as a repository in ideal political moments by the moneyed and the powerful. Dewey’s vision of an informed public is now a sated public, confident in the omnipresent embrace of confirmation bias and other heuristics.

CNN averts truth through balanced scientism, whilst Fox practices motivated obfuscation to retain its powerful niche of the market. Each is required to compromise in its own way. But CNN compromises on effectiveness to retain its perceived integrity, whereas Fox does the opposite. The problem I observe, in the age of Trump, is that de-legitimization of the liberal media has been furthered to an almost intractable level now, and it feels inevitable to me that more aggressive de-legitimization of conservative media will be required to possibly limit President Trump to a single term. But messaging wars, able to stoke the anticipation of change around election time (Wisconsin!), inevitably translate into eye-off-the-ball policymaking, and an increased abandonment of substance in the media will continue to erode the (supposed) primacy of legislating in a politician’s job description.

Or, to put it another way—is there any issue these guys won’t or can’t spin?

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Notes


3 Ibid.

8 Oreskes and Conway, Merchants of Doubt, chap. 1.

9 I would highly recommend, for those interested in the sub-discipline of agnotology (i.e., the construction of ignorance), chapters 1, 3, and 4 of R. Proctor and L.L. Schiebinger, eds., Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).


22 Oreskes and Conway, Merchants of Doubt: 207-213.

23 Feldman, Climate on Cable, 3.


30 Iyengar, Selective Exposure, 187.


32 Feldman, Climate on Cable, 16-20.


35 J. Haidt, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion (New York: Vintage, 2012). Chapter eight provides perhaps the neatest summation of this idea, which I have admittedly simplified at the risk of de-contextualizing it entirely. However, for those interested in the relationship between psychology and political wedges, this is essential reading.


38 R. Correll, Anderson Cooper 360°, 2006.

