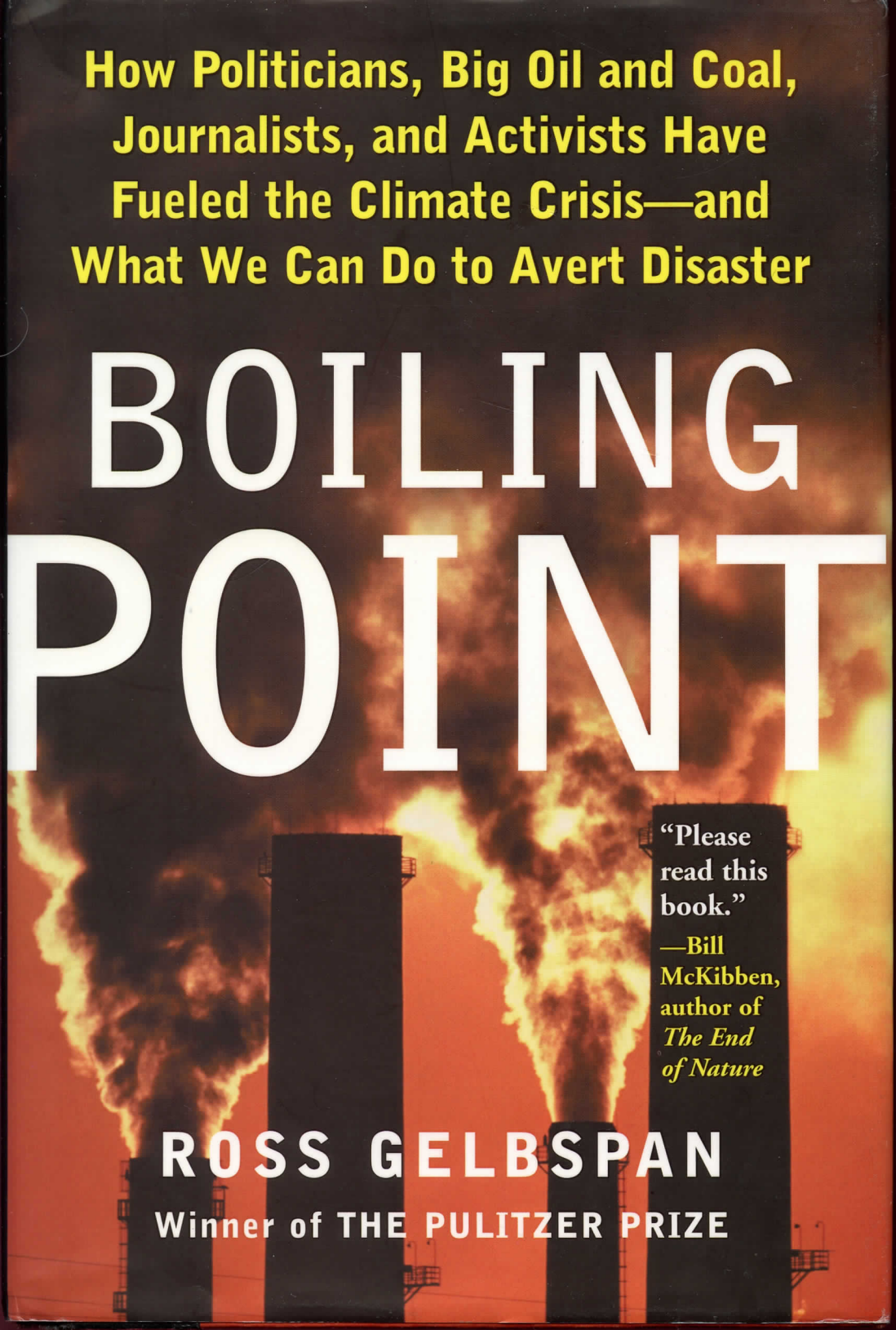
How Politicians, Big Oil and Coal, Journalists, and Activists Have Fueled the Climate Crisis—and What We Can Do to Avert Disaster

BOILING POINT



"Please read this book."
—Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature*

ROSS GELBSPAN

Winner of THE PULITZER PRIZE

4

Bad Press

[T]he press's adherence to balance actually leads to biased coverage of global warming . . . This bias, hidden behind the veil of journalistic balance, creates . . . political space for the U.S. government to shirk responsibility and delay action regarding global warming.

— Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff, "Balance as Bias: Global Warming and the U.S. Prestige Press," *Global Environmental Change* 14 (1) June 2004

If the public relations specialists of the oil and coal industries are criminals against humanity, the U.S. press has basically played the role of unwitting accomplice by consistently minimizing this story, if not burying it from public view altogether.

In 1997, Bert Bolin, a Swedish meteorologist who was, at the time, chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, declared: "The large majority of governments, while recognizing uncertainties, believe that we know

enough to take action now. This position was supported by an independent group of 2,000 scientists."

Or, as James McCarthy, who would later chair Working Group II of the IPCC, noted several years ago: "There is no debate among any statured scientists working on this issue about the larger trends of what is happening to the climate."

That is something you would never know from the press coverage.

Although the scientific community has known since 1995 that we are changing our climate, the U.S. press has done a deplorable job in disseminating that information, and all its implications, to the public.

There are a number of reasons for this—none of them, given the magnitude of the story, justifiable.

On a somewhat superficial level, the career path to the top at news outlets normally lies in following the track of political reporting. Top editors tend to see all issues through a political lens.

For instance, although climate change has been the focus of a number of feature stories (and small, normally buried reports of scientific findings), the only time it has gained real news prominence is when it has played a role in the country's politics. During the 1988 presidential campaign, the first President Bush slapped the label of "ozone man" on Al Gore because of his book, *Earth in the Balance.* (It does not seem to be a coincidence that Gore totally ran away from the climate issue during the 2000 campaign.)

The issue again received prominent coverage in 1997 when the Senate voted overwhelmingly not to ratify the

Kyoto Protocol—not because of the substa
signaled a political setback for the Clinton
the hands of congressional Republicans
press paid scant attention to an industry-
blitz in the run-up to that vote. That can
$13 million, centered on the message tha
col "isn't global and it isn't fair" (becau
developing countries from the first roun
ductions). Tellingly, the ads all appeared in
New York-based media outlets that were r
gets of the campaign—U.S. senators.

Most recently, the issue surfaced wh
withdrew the United States from the Kyo
the coverage focused not on climate chan
diplomatic tensions between the United St
pean Union (EU).

Prior to his withdrawal from Kyoto,
clared he would not accept the findings
cause the organization represented "fore
though about half of the 2,000 scientists
tributes to the IPCC reports are Americ
called for a report from the U.S. Nationa
ences that would provide "American sci
quent response from the NAS not only aff
of the IPCC but indicated that the IPCC
derstated the magnitude of some coming

Astonishingly, even as the Washingt
ported this story, few—if any—reporters
the position of the NAS. Had they done s

Kyoto Protocol—not because of the substance but because it signaled a political setback for the Clinton administration at the hands of congressional Republicans. Remarkably, the press paid scant attention to an industry-funded advertising blitz in the run-up to that vote. That campaign, which cost $13 million, centered on the message that the Kyoto Protocol "isn't global and it isn't fair" (because it exempts the developing countries from the first round of emissions reductions). Tellingly, the ads all appeared in Washington- and New York-based media outlets that were read by the real targets of the campaign—U.S. senators.

Most recently, the issue surfaced when President Bush withdrew the United States from the Kyoto process. Again, the coverage focused not on climate change but on resulting diplomatic tensions between the United States and the European Union (EU).

Prior to his withdrawal from Kyoto, President Bush declared he would not accept the findings of the IPCC—because the organization represented "foreign science," even though about half of the 2,000 scientists whose work contributes to the IPCC reports are American. Instead, Bush called for a report from the U.S. National Academy of Sciences that would provide "American science." The subsequent response from the NAS not only affirmed the findings of the IPCC but indicated that the IPCC may have even understated the magnitude of some coming impacts.

Astonishingly, even as the Washington press corps reported this story, few—if any—reporters bothered to check the position of the NAS. Had they done so, they would have

found that as early as 1992, three years before the IPCC determined that we are changing the climate by our burning of oil and coal, the NAS recommended strong measures to minimize climate impacts.

The culture of journalism is, basically, a political culture that is not particularly hospitable—that is, in fact, institutionally arrogant—toward nonpolitical areas of coverage.

If the press were disposed to look beyond just the politics of Kyoto, it would be an eye-opener for the American public.

Aside from the pledges by Holland, Germany, and Britain to cut emissions by 50 to 80 percent in the next half century, the efforts by other countries to begin to address the climate crisis stand in vivid contrast to the indifference of the United States.

That contrast is apparent in the difference between the coverage of the climate crisis in the American press and the news media in other countries. While there has been no systematic and thorough analysis of comparative media coverage of the climate crisis in different countries, one recent study compared the attention given to the climate by the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* to three major newspapers in Britain and Germany. According to a weighted sampling between September 1999 and March 2000, the coverage in Britain was almost twice that of the press in the United States. The British paper, the *Guardian*, for example, accorded more than three times more coverage to the climate issue than the *Washington Post*, more than twice the coverage of the *New York Times*, and nearly five times more coverage than the *Los Angeles Times*.

The German papers surveyed during the sa
vided more coverage than the U.S. press—b
pected, given the prominence of climate and
Germany's political life. Anja Kollmuss, who
study, attributed that result to the fact th
spanned a period in which the German press
suit of a major financial scandal involving
minister Helmut Kohl.

In June 2003, the European Union agree
to reduce carbon fuel use through a systen
trading" that will take effect in 2005. The EU
emissions by 8 percent below 1990 levels, b
cember 2002, the fifteen EU governments es
tem in which companies in industries tha
energy intensive will be assigned quotas for
emissions. Those who exceed their limit will
extra quota from others that stay below thei
The trading system will cover emissions from
heating industries, together with producers o
glass, tile, paper, and cardboard. The story w
featured in the European press but was virtu
the United States.

Nor have American journalists paid much
growth of renewable energy around the world.
Europe, as one example, has been growing at a
cent a year—much of it in the form of offsh
"It's going so fast now because there is a race
with manufacturers and utilities competing fo
Corin Millais of the European Wind Ener

The German papers surveyed during the same period provided more coverage than the U.S. press—but less than expected, given the prominence of climate and energy issues in Germany's political life. Anja Kollmuss, who conducted the study, attributed that result to the fact that her sample spanned a period in which the German press was in full pursuit of a major financial scandal involving former prime minister Helmut Kohl.

In June 2003, the European Union agreed on a compact to reduce carbon fuel use through a system of "emissions trading" that will take effect in 2005. The EU pledged to cut emissions by 8 percent below 1990 levels, by 2010. In December 2002, the fifteen EU governments established a system in which companies in industries that are especially energy intensive will be assigned quotas for carbon dioxide emissions. Those who exceed their limit will be able to buy extra quota from others that stay below their allotted levels. The trading system will cover emissions from the power and heating industries, together with producers of steel, cement, glass, tile, paper, and cardboard. The story was prominently featured in the European press but was virtually ignored in the United States.

Nor have American journalists paid much attention to the growth of renewable energy around the world. Wind power in Europe, as one example, has been growing at a rate of 40 percent a year—much of it in the form of offshore wind farms. "It's going so fast now because there is a race to go offshore, with manufacturers and utilities competing for the jobs," said Corin Millais of the European Wind Energy Association.

"Companies are now talking of wind fields, like oil reserves or coal reserves, waiting to be tapped," Millais added.

Journalists might also have done a bit of checking on President Bush's assertion that one reason the United States has refused to accept emission reduction goals is because it would put the nation at a competitive disadvantage relative to developing countries.

In fact, many developing countries have taken very significant strides in this area. Through its development of hydropower and natural gas, for instance, Argentina has cut emissions by about 500 million tons over a twenty-five-year period. India is developing and deploying a range of climate-friendly technologies, including solar-electric facilities in rural areas, fuel cells for transportation, an array of wind farms, and the use of biomass to generate electricity. Even China, with its vast deposits of coal, managed to cut its greenhouse emissions by 19 percent during a five-year period in which its economy grew by 36 percent.

Were journalists to look beyond short-term political implications, their reporting would bring home how profoundly out of step the United States is relative to the rest of the world.

The next reason the issue is so neglected by the U.S. media has to do with the campaign of disinformation perpetrated by big coal and big oil. Although that campaign targeted the public and the policymakers, it also had a profound effect on journalists.

For many years, the press accorded the same weight to the "skeptics" as it did to mainstream scientists. This was

done in the name of journalistic balance.
nalistic laziness.

The ethic of journalistic balance co
there is a story involving opinion: Shoul
Should we invade Iraq? Should we have
or English immersion? At that point, an
obligated to give each competing view
presentation—and equivalent space.

But when it's a question of fact, it's
dig into a story and find out what the fa
balance is not relevant when the focus of
this case, what is known about the clim
largest and most rigorously peer-reviewe
ration in history.

As James Baker, head of the U.S. Na
and Oceanic Administration, said, "The
tific consensus on any other issue I kno
Newton's second law of dynamics."

Granted, there may be a few crede
most notably Richard Lindzen—who ha
peer-reviewed literature and who minimi
relatively inconsequential.

In that case, if balance is required, it
reporter spend a little time reviewing the
some scientists on background, learning
scientific opinion lay—and reflecting *that*
reporting. That kind of truly accurate bal
flected the position of mainstream scienti
the story—with the skeptics getting a para

done in the name of journalistic balance. In fact, it was journalistic laziness.

The ethic of journalistic balance comes into play when there is a story involving opinion: Should abortion be legal? Should we invade Iraq? Should we have bilingual education or English immersion? At that point, an ethical journalist is obligated to give each competing view its most articulate presentation—and equivalent space.

But when it's a question of fact, it's up to a reporter to dig into a story and find out what the facts are. The issue of balance is not relevant when the focus of a story is factual. In this case, what is known about the climate comes from the largest and most rigorously peer-reviewed scientific collaboration in history.

As James Baker, head of the U.S. National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration, said, "There's no better scientific consensus on any other issue I know—except perhaps Newton's second law of dynamics."

Granted, there may be a few credentialed scientists—most notably Richard Lindzen—who have published in the peer-reviewed literature and who minimize climate change as relatively inconsequential.

In that case, if balance is required, it would suggest that a reporter spend a little time reviewing the literature, talking to some scientists on background, learning where the weight of scientific opinion lay—and reflecting *that* balance in his or her reporting. That kind of truly accurate balance would have reflected the position of mainstream scientists in 95 percent of the story—with the skeptics getting a paragraph at the end.

Today, that is finally beginning to happen.

A separate explanation for the failure of journalists to cover the climate crisis thoroughly lies in the fact that few journalists are comfortable with complex scientific information. Although a small number of news outlets have permanent science or environmental reporters on their staffs, more typically scientific and environmental stories are covered by general assignment reporters with no background in complex, scientific data. That lack of preparation is compounded by the daily deadlines that frequently deprive reporters of the time to fully digest complex scientific papers.

In fairness, the problem is compounded by many scientists. In their public statements, most scientists use extremely conservative and qualified language. Although this circumspect language is a requirement of approved scientific discourse, it leaves many journalists uncertain as to how meaningful a particular finding is.

One way to cut through this problem is through the time-honored use of background conversations with scientists. On the record, scientists typically speak in terms of probabilities and estimates and uncertainties. As a result, they sound to an untrained reporter as vague, wishy-washy, almost indecisive. But off the record, when asked to distill the implications of their findings, many scientists would make such statements as, "This is scary as hell." For a journalist who is not equipped to assess the relevance of a new computer model study, for example, the best fallback is to discuss the finding with scientists on background—and to solicit informal assessments from other scientists who specialize in the same area. Although backgr
do not provide quotes, they are essential
derstanding of the finding itself and enh
the reporter to put that information in a
context.

Background discussions can be extre
sessing the dimensions and reporting requ
without compromising the identity of sou

Remarkably, many journalists shy a
mary source of climate science informati
peer-reviewed literature. Most scientists
and economically. These papers, while
stated, are not beyond the comprehension
a lay reporter, virtually the only science
beyond comprehension are those that c
models and involve extremely high-leve
those cases, background discussions with
necessary, unless the reporter has been e
of computer modeling. But the vast majo
papers on climate change are quite accessi
to take the time to read them.

At a conference of the Society of Envi
ists several years ago, one veteran reporter
paper confessed that he had recently rea
for the first time, rather than relying on
others. He characterized it as a liberating
the literature firsthand. Many reporter
sponded as though this were a revelatio
embarrassing acknowledgment of journali

cialize in the same area. Although background conversations do not provide quotes, they are essential to a reporter's understanding of the finding itself and enhance the ability of the reporter to put that information in a useful, interpretive context.

Background discussions can be extremely helpful in assessing the dimensions and reporting requirements of stories without compromising the identity of sources.

Remarkably, many journalists shy away from the primary source of climate science information—articles in the peer-reviewed literature. Most scientists write very clearly and economically. These papers, while frequently understated, are not beyond the comprehension of journalists. For a lay reporter, virtually the only science papers that may be beyond comprehension are those that center on computer models and involve extremely high-level mathematics. In those cases, background discussions with the researchers are necessary, unless the reporter has been educated in the area of computer modeling. But the vast majority of the scientific papers on climate change are quite accessible if one is willing to take the time to read them.

At a conference of the Society of Environmental Journalists several years ago, one veteran reporter from a large newspaper confessed that he had recently read a scientific paper for the first time, rather than relying on the summaries of others. He characterized it as a liberating experience to read the literature firsthand. Many reporters in the room responded as though this were a revelation—rather than an embarrassing acknowledgment of journalistic laziness.

Today climate change is no longer an issue of atmospheric science, although many scientific uncertainties remain—for instance, the role of clouds, future rates of warming, and specific impacts in particular geographic areas, to name a few. But the overwhelming predominance of climate research today focuses on the impacts of that warming. And those impacts are not beyond the grasp of journalists.

Any reporter who really wanted to make climate change more accessible to a general audience would need to look no further than the weather reports.

One of the first signs of early-stage global warming is an increase in weather extremes—longer droughts, more heat waves, more severe storms, and much more intense, severe dumps of rain and snow. Today, extreme weather events constitute a much larger portion of news budgets than they did twenty years ago.

Global warming, even without the amplification of periodic El Niños—is palpably changing the nature of our weather. It is almost as though nature is saying: "Look out the window. Time's up."

Following up on an earlier landmark study by Tom Karl, David Easterling of the National Climatic Data Center reported in a September 2000 article in *Science* that as the atmosphere warms, droughts, floods, heat waves, heavy rainfall, tropical storms, and hurricanes are expected to increase.

Wrote Easterling: "Our review shows consistency between our climate models and what we have observed in the 20th century. Models of 21st-century climate suggest that many of these changes in climate extremes are likely to continue."

Those findings were underscored by a g
port released by the World Meteorologic
July 2003. As the British newspaper the *Ind*
"In an astonishing announcement on globa
treme weather, the World Meteorological
naled that the world's weather is going hay

"The WMO concluded that these rec
(high temperatures, low temperatures
amounts, and droughts) have been gradua
the past 100 years. New record extreme
year somewhere in the globe, but in recent
of such extremes have been increasing."

The physics behind the altered drough
terns are not extraordinarily complicated:
warms, it accelerates the evaporation of sur
warms the ocean waters, speeding up their
The heated air expands to hold more wat
mal turbulence comes through the atmosp
much more intense downpours. The warm
tributes the moisture within the atmosp
more intense storms and rainfalls and mo
protracted droughts.

The destructive power of more intens
highlighted in a report by ABC News
LeMone, a senior scientist at the National
spheric Research, was asked to calculate the
white cumulus cloud. "The water in the l
about 550 tons," she said. "Or if you wan
something that might be a little more mea

Those findings were underscored by a groundbreaking report released by the World Meteorological Organization in July 2003. As the British newspaper the *Independent* reported: "In an astonishing announcement on global warming and extreme weather, the World Meteorological Organization signaled that the world's weather is going haywire.

"The WMO concluded that these record extreme events (high temperatures, low temperatures and high rainfall amounts, and droughts) have been gradually increasing over the past 100 years. New record extreme events occur every year somewhere in the globe, but in recent years the number of such extremes have been increasing."

The physics behind the altered drought and rainfall patterns are not extraordinarily complicated: As the atmosphere warms, it accelerates the evaporation of surface waters. It also warms the ocean waters, speeding up their evaporation rates. The heated air expands to hold more water. When the normal turbulence comes through the atmosphere, it results in much more intense downpours. The warming air also redistributes the moisture within the atmosphere—leading to more intense storms and rainfalls and more prolonged and protracted droughts.

The destructive power of more intense downpours was highlighted in a report by ABC News in which Peggy LeMone, a senior scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, was asked to calculate the weight of a small, white cumulus cloud. "The water in the little cloud weighs about 550 tons," she said. "Or if you want to convert it to something that might be a little more meaningful . . . think

of elephants." Since a normal adult elephant weighs about six tons, she said, that would mean that water inside one typical cumulus cloud would weigh about 100 elephants.

Many scientists believe we have already crossed into a new weather regime marked by extremes of all kinds.

Take the year 2001 as one example.

At the beginning of the year, Britain emerged from its wettest winter in more than 270 years of record keeping. In January and February, twenty-two successive blizzards in northern China stranded more than 100,000 herders, many of whom starved. In South Florida, the worst drought in 100 years decimated citrus crops, prompted extensive water restrictions, and triggered the spread of more than 1,200 wildfires. In early May, some forty people died in the hottest spring on record in Pakistan. In June, Houston suffered the single most expensive storm in modern history when tropical storm Allison dropped thirty-five inches of rain in one week, leaving $6 billion in damages. By late July, a protracted drought in Central America had left more than 1.5 million farmers with no crops to harvest—and 1 million people verging on malnutrition. In Iran, a devastating drought left more than $2.5 billion in agricultural losses. (The drought was temporarily interrupted in August by Iran's worst flash flooding in 200 years, which killed nearly 500 people.) In October, meteorologists documented a record ninety-two tornadoes in what is normally a quiet period for these events. In November, the worst flooding in memory killed more than 1,000 people in Algeria. In Boston, after an October and November of record-setting warmth, it was 71°F on December 1.

In the following year, 2002, more than 1,0
from a spring heat wave in India. The sumr
Russia, the Czech Republic, and Germany v
in memory. Wildfires consumed more than 5 r
the western United States and northern Car
conditions spread over half the United States.
235 million people were plunged into darkr
electricity grid collapsed because its hydroel
dried up. Health officials reported locally trans
malaria in northern Virginia. West Nile virus s
two states—and, even more disturbing, to m
species of mammals, insects, and birds. (Stagna
downpours, which follow extended dry period
breeding ground for mosquitoes that spread ma
Nile virus.) In South Asia, more than 12 millio
displaced by severe flooding.

In the spring of 2003, 1,400 people die
wave in India and Pakistan. The United States
record 562 tornadoes in the month of May.
wave in Europe set new temperature records ir
gered Portugal's worst forest fires in fifty years
many as 11,000 people in France in a four-wee

Given the dramatic increase in extreme w
one might think that journalists, in covering
would include the line: "Scientists associate t
violent weather with global warming." They do

A few years ago, a top editor at a major TV
asked why, given the increasing proportion of
dedicated to weather disasters, the network ne

In the following year, 2002, more than 1,000 people died from a spring heat wave in India. The summer's floods in Russia, the Czech Republic, and Germany were the worst in memory. Wildfires consumed more than 5 million acres in the western United States and northern Canada. Drought conditions spread over half the United States. Back in India, 235 million people were plunged into darkness when the electricity grid collapsed because its hydroelectric sources dried up. Health officials reported locally transmitted cases of malaria in northern Virginia. West Nile virus spread to forty-two states—and, even more disturbing, to more than 230 species of mammals, insects, and birds. (Stagnant pools from downpours, which follow extended dry periods, create fertile breeding ground for mosquitoes that spread malaria and West Nile virus.) In South Asia, more than 12 million people were displaced by severe flooding.

In the spring of 2003, 1,400 people died from a heat wave in India and Pakistan. The United States experienced a record 562 tornadoes in the month of May. A brutal heat wave in Europe set new temperature records in Britain, triggered Portugal's worst forest fires in fifty years, and killed as many as 11,000 people in France in a four-week period.

Given the dramatic increase in extreme weather events, one might think that journalists, in covering these stories, would include the line: "Scientists associate this pattern of violent weather with global warming." They don't.

A few years ago, a top editor at a major TV network was asked why, given the increasing proportion of news budgets dedicated to weather disasters, the network news broadcasts

did not make this connection. The editor said, "We did that. Once. But it triggered a barrage of complaints from the Global Climate Coalition to our top executives at the network." (The GCC was, at the time, the main fossil fuel industry lobbying group opposing action on global warming.)

The lobbyists subtly changed the subject by arguing that you can't attribute any one extreme event to climate change—just as you cannot attribute any one case of lung cancer to smoking. But that is off point. The scientific community is unambiguous in its finding that the first and most visible manifestation of the planet's warming is an increase in violent weather extremes.

The editor agreed that it would be very useful to the public in covering severe floods, droughts, and storms to note that "scientists associated this *pattern* of violent weather with global warming." But in the end, he confided, the industry basically intimidated the network into dropping this connection from its coverage. The threat was implicit: If the network persisted, it ran the risk of losing a lot of lucrative oil and auto advertising dollars.

Beyond the connection with extreme weather events lies a deeper betrayal of trust here by the media. By now, most reporters and editors have heard enough from environmentalists to know that global warming could, at least, have potentially catastrophic consequences. Given that reality, it is profoundly irresponsible for editors or reporters to pass along the story with only some counterposing quotes and without doing enough digging to satisfy themselves as to the bottom-line gravity of the situation. Their

assessment needn't be the same as that of e
ists. But simply to treat the story like any c
taking the time to reach an informed judg
potential gravity—is a fundamental violation
readers and viewers who assume a modicu
interpretation from their news providers.

In their paper "Balance as Bias: Global W
U.S. Prestige Press," Maxwell T. Boykoff
Boykoff make a strong case that the formulaic
ist balance has put the United States years be
the world in beginning to act on the climate

"The continuous juggling act journalists
mitigates against meaningful, accurate and u
of the issue of global warming," they wrote.
eral public garners most of its knowledge
from the mass media . . . the disjuncture be
discourse and popular discourse [is responsi
that] significant and concerted international
yet been taken to curb practices that contr
warming."

On another level, slightly removed, cove
mate crisis has been one of many casualties of
the news industry by a small number of mas
glomerates. Traditionally, most newspapers
families or companies that felt a profound o
mission of news. Owners of news outlets we
content with profits of about 10 percent—
were able to fulfill what they saw as their mis
ing the public.

assessment needn't be the same as that of environmentalists. But simply to treat the story like any other—without taking the time to reach an informed judgment about its potential gravity—is a fundamental violation of the trust of readers and viewers who assume a modicum of informed interpretation from their news providers.

In their paper "Balance as Bias: Global Warming and the U.S. Prestige Press," Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff make a strong case that the formulaic use of journalist balance has put the United States years behind the rest of the world in beginning to act on the climate crisis.

"The continuous juggling act journalists engage in often mitigates against meaningful, accurate and urgent coverage of the issue of global warming," they wrote. "Since the general public garners most of its knowledge about science from the mass media . . . the disjuncture between scientific discourse and popular discourse [is responsible for the fact that] significant and concerted international action has not yet been taken to curb practices that contribute to global warming."

On another level, slightly removed, coverage of the climate crisis has been one of many casualties of the takeover of the news industry by a small number of massive media conglomerates. Traditionally, most newspapers were owned by families or companies that felt a profound obligation to the mission of news. Owners of news outlets were traditionally content with profits of about 10 percent—as long as they were able to fulfill what they saw as their mission of informing the public.

Unfortunately, with the acquisition of most news outlets by a small group of conglomerates, the direction of the business has been determined by the profit-driven demands of Wall Street. One result is that marketing strategy is replacing news judgment. Another result is that most newspapers have been cutting staff and failing to provide reporters with the time they need for thorough reporting of complex stories. At the same time, they have sacrificed real news coverage to increase readership and advertising through more celebrity coverage, more self-help articles, and more trivial medical news.

The result is that the complex, multifaceted, and frequently depressing story of climate change has gotten very short shrift in the news media.

There are enough aspects to the issues that surround this story—science, extreme weather, technology developments, oil industry movements, terrorism and security, diplomatic tensions, economic ramifications—that it should be in the paper three times a week. Rather than ghettoized as a subbeat of environmental reporters, the climate issue should be integrated into much broader areas of coverage. Because it is not, the U.S. public is far less aware than most of the rest of the world of the economic and political implications of climate change.

Over and above the campaign of manufactured denial by the fossil fuel public relations specialists, there is a natural human tendency toward denial of this issue. When one is confronted by a truly overwhelming problem—and one does not see an apparent solution—the most natural human reac-

tion is to not want to know about it. And t
itors just as much as readers.

For that reason, it is critical for the pub
that there do exist solutions that would ac
cent cuts required by nature, even as they v
numbers of jobs and economic growth—es
oping countries.

If a person sees that there is an intellect
tion, then, and only then, will he or she let
Absent that realization, denial is the inevita

The U.S. press today is in "stage-two"
mate crisis. Editors acknowledge its existe
minimize its scope and urgency. This is evic
tern of coverage that provides occasiona
about the decimation of the forests in Al
continues to ignore the central diplomat
economic conflicts around the issue.

By underreporting this story, the press
the conversation toward solutions and, in t
ing the positive potential embedded in t
There are solutions—some of which could
also hold the key to solving some of the
problems facing humanity today.

Some observers argue that the Europe
ered the climate issue more thoroughly th
simply because European politicians raise t
quently than politicians in the United Sta
that argument, the European press is no mo
coverage than the U.S. press. Both are sim

tion is to not want to know about it. And that applies to editors just as much as readers.

For that reason, it is critical for the public to understand that there do exist solutions that would achieve the 70 percent cuts required by nature, even as they would create huge numbers of jobs and economic growth—especially in developing countries.

If a person sees that there is an intellectually honest solution, then, and only then, will he or she let the bad news in. Absent that realization, denial is the inevitable response.

The U.S. press today is in "stage-two" denial of the climate crisis. Editors acknowledge its existence even as they minimize its scope and urgency. This is evident from the pattern of coverage that provides occasional feature stories about the decimation of the forests in Alaska—but which continues to ignore the central diplomatic, political, and economic conflicts around the issue.

By underreporting this story, the press is failing to move the conversation toward solutions and, in the process, ignoring the positive potential embedded in the climate crisis. There are solutions—some of which could, if implemented, also hold the key to solving some of the most intractable problems facing humanity today.

Some observers argue that the European press has covered the climate issue more thoroughly than the U.S. press simply because European politicians raise the issue more frequently than politicians in the United States. According to that argument, the European press is no more proactive in its coverage than the U.S. press. Both are simply reflecting the

agendas of their political leaders. Given the absence of any comprehensive studies on the subject, it is impossible to determine whether the disparity in coverage is simply due to the press's tendency to follow the lead of a country's newsmakers—or whether papers like the *Guardian* and the *Independent* (in Britain) and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Sueddeutsche* (in Germany) are initiating much of their coverage of the climate issue.

But in assessing the responsibility of the press, the argument seems somewhat academic. If a political leader raises an issue, the press follows it. Conversely, if the press raises a significant issue, it is almost impossible for politicians to ignore it. Witness the political responses to the press coverage in late 2003 of mad cow disease—a subject that received scant coverage inside the United States prior to its emergence in an infected cow in Washington state. That coverage put the issue of food safety into the political agenda in the United States.

The power of the press in the United States, however diluted by commercial pressures, is still formidable. When the press covers an issue thoroughly and consistently, the pubic responds. Policies are changed. Laws get passed. Witness, for example, the press's coverage of tobacco science, which has profoundly changed the nation's smoking habits. Press stories a generation ago, which highlighted instances of discrimination against African Americans and other ethnic groups, contributed to major changes in the country's civil rights laws. In the 1970s, stories about the degradation of the Great Lakes and the increasing dangers of chemical con-

tamination prompted then president Richar
ate the Environmental Protection Agency.
about massacres in Vietnamese villages and
porting of U.S. casualties contributed to
protest that ultimately led to America's w
Vietnam. And the follow-up coverage of an
markable break-in in a Washington, D.C.,
impeachment and resignation of a presider
States. One would think that the climate cri
precedented peril and promise, merits at le
gree of media attention.

Finally, the climate issue is riven with c
level—and conflict is, if nothing else, the li
nalism. This issue, moreover, presents a trer
tunity for professional gratification. To side
to deprive oneself of an extraordinary profes
This is an immense drama. Its outcome
doubt. This is by far the most important a
any reporter could ever want to work on.

The conflicts are there. They are just wait

tamination prompted then president Richard Nixon to create the Environmental Protection Agency. Press revelations about massacres in Vietnamese villages and official underreporting of U.S. casualties contributed to a tidal wave of protest that ultimately led to America's withdrawal from Vietnam. And the follow-up coverage of an apparently unremarkable break-in in a Washington, D.C., office led to the impeachment and resignation of a president of the United States. One would think that the climate crisis, in all its unprecedented peril and promise, merits at least the same degree of media attention.

Finally, the climate issue is riven with conflicts at every level—and conflict is, if nothing else, the lifeblood of journalism. This issue, moreover, presents a tremendous opportunity for professional gratification. To sidestep this story is to deprive oneself of an extraordinary professional challenge. This is an immense drama. Its outcome is very much in doubt. This is by far the most important and exciting story any reporter could ever want to work on.

The conflicts are there. They are just waiting to be written.