

Seeding doubt: how sceptics use new media to delay action on climate change

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This paper explores the ways in which new media is used to derail action on climate change. Climate change can be a gloomy subject; but in the spirit of this conference I'll attempt to map out some productive coordinates for what is an increasingly urgent question. First I provide a (very) brief summary of the scientific consensus, and examples of where this is undermined online. Then I explore whether this phenomena is of substantive enough importance for our attention. Finally, I address its implications for new media and democratic renewal.

On 3rd August this year, IPCC Chairman Rajendra Pachauri told the *Chicago Tribune*: "The science about climate change is very clear. There really is no room for doubt at this point."ⁱ Since publication of the 4th IPCC report in 2007, the mainstream media has, in general, accepted this position. As Andreadis and Smith (2007) note, UK journalists are no longer required to balance each warning voice. Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Cristine Russell concurred, suggesting that for US journalists "the era of 'equal time' for sceptics... is largely over."ⁱⁱ

However, the results of a long campaign of disinformation are depressing. In a poll conducted by Ipsos Mori in June this year, 60% of the UK public agreed that "many scientific experts still question if humans are contributing to climate change." A third of Conservative MPsⁱⁱⁱ and three-quarters of Republicans in Congress think the same.^{iv}

What is new media's role in this? Nearly a quarter of the world's population now use the Internet on a regular basis.^v Over 41 million people went online in the UK in March 2008, 67% of the population.^{vi} Yet little research has been conducted into the web's influence on climate consensus. It is interesting to return to Cristine Russell and her claim that "the era of 'equal time' for sceptics... is largely over, except," she adds "on talk radio, cable and local television."^{vii} I have argued in a response to the CJR^{viii} that Russell's list must include new media. My definition here includes what Clay Shirky calls the extra-institutional blogosphere (Shirky, 2008), as well as mainstream media and the multitude comments and links that extend through the web. It is my contention that new media is providing the spatial and temporal freedoms that, when combined with the ability to publish free from peer-review and from journalistic codes, provides the 'room for doubt' for which Pachauri says there is no longer any time.

Do we have time for ill-informed scepticism and disinformation? As Oreskes and Renouf revealed just this Sunday on BB2, we've had 30 years of it now.^{ix} The IPCC warn that we have only 10 years to act to avoid runaway climate change. The question could also be: does our democracy even have time for new media? Such a question is to quote Raymond Williams,

writing in 1974, one of the “extreme social choices” that we have to face as the result of a technology that is “used to affect, to alter, and in some cases control our whole social process” (Williams, 1974). Anna Notaro argues, convincingly, this is more relevant for the Internet today than TV in the 1970s (Notaro, 2006).

At around the same time, writing in 1971, Robert Dahl described societies as ‘polyarchies’ or worlds of competing interests, where contested information is just one facet of that competition. This is a useful way to think about climate change in relation to democratic renewal, as sceptic discourses have been found to sow doubt as a means to protect the economic interests of Western enclaves (McCright and Dunlap, 2003). What is the contribution made to this contest by new media? The question hangs off three issues: use, volume, and impact. I’ll take each in turn.

First, in what ways is new media used to spread sceptical discourse? Three examples. In December 2007, the *New Statesman* published an article by David Whitehouse claiming “global warming has, temporarily or permanently, ceased.”^x Three weeks later, *New Statesman* columnist and climate author Mark Lynas wrote: “Whitehouse got it wrong – completely wrong.”^{xi} Web editor Ben Davies let the forum debate run five months, attracting 3,004 comments: this could not happen in a letters page. This delivers the promise of what Howard Rheingold saw as “a way of revitalising the open and widespread discussions among citizens that feeds the roots of democratic society” (Rheingold 1993). The important thing here is that the comments were in support of the sceptic Whitehouse, by a ratio of about six-to-one.

Do we believe this ratio is representative, or just mimics the internecine morass afflicting news sites such as the *Guardian’s Comment is Free*? The same ratio was quoted by Downing and Ballantyne in their 2007 report ‘Turning Point or Tipping Point?’ for comments received after the airing of Channel 4’s *Great Global Warming Swindle*. According to them “Channel 4 anecdotally reported that among the 700 comments it received [including phone, but mainly online], supporters outnumbered critics six to one.” Channel 4 Head of Documentaries Hamish Mykura, writing in the *Guardian*, used this ‘anecdotal’ evidence to shore up its broadcast (to 2.7m viewers).^{xii} That comment-board rants are used to justify such flawed programming is indicative of the force of new media in promulgating sceptical positions.

Andy Revkin, on the *New York Times* Dot Earth Blog in July, writes of the “whiplash” suffered by the public, “created by blow-by-blow media coverage of scientific findings on global warming.” He quotes an expert on risk from Harvard, who explains the dizzying confusion as the result of “flaws in the web of relationships among participants in communication; these tend to amplify overstatements.” Revkin continues: “In the comments below, I’ll add ideas and context provided by other experts whose voices didn’t fit in the newspaper article—one of the values of a blog is that it provides depth for those seeking it.”^{xiii} Revkin handily summarises how his own new media practice—to compensate for the paper’s space limitations—is central to the confusion he describes, and prompts us ask: how is it that unlimited new media space *a priori* has a wider set of parameters for assessing authentic viewpoints?

These examples are illustrative of the myriad ways in which different forms of new media are utilized to support climate disinformation. I have specifically chosen mainstream media sites,

and their permeation into other forms of media, rather than individual blogs, to move away from the idea that it is only single issue fanatics (SIFs) that propagate climate denial.

There is presence, but what of the volume? There is very little research in this area, perhaps because as of February this year there were 112m blogs tracked by Technorati.com, not including the 72.8m in China.^{xiv} In research to be published, Neil Gavin argues that few people are searching out climate change information online, and those that are find “an environment that is more digital jungle than ‘public cyber-sphere’” (Gavin, forthcoming). However, rather than Googling as Gavin does, turning up 80 million entries for climate change or global warming, another starting point is to look at blog aggregation sites. While this omits traditional media, it is a good measure for extra-institutional influence. On Wikio, four of the top 20 science blogs are sceptics. The most successful, WattsUpWiththat.com, the US-based blog of sceptic and former weatherman Anthony Watts, in July this year posted 646,024 page views (2.8m since launch). It is in the top four of 3.4m blogs using the free online blog authoring tool, Wordpress^{xv}. Using the latest Nielsen Net Ratings data, even the most conservative estimate would give it over 300,000 monthly visits and a readership of over 31,000 users.^{xvi} Compare that to the *New Statesman’s* 12.7% year-on-year decline, to headline sales of just over 26,000.

It is not just individuals. In McCright and Dunlap’s 2003 study of the US rejection of Kyoto, they focused on 14 conservative think tanks that used their publishing capacities to “advance science-related positions outside of the peer-reviewed scientific community” (McCright & Dunlap, 2003). Of the 14 think tanks, eight have progressed to using blogs formats, e.g. Cato-at-Liberty, of the Cato Institute singled out for its propaganda in Nick Davies’ book (Davies, 2008); the other six all publish daily or weekly updates on their existing sites.

In the UK sceptic sites are fewer, but are well read and bound up with concepts of nationalism. Climate denier An Englishman’s Castle is in *Total Politics* magazine’s Top 20 libertarian blogs. Political sites dominate online, and many libertarian sites such as Newsbusters.com (70th most influential blog, according to Technorati.com) regularly support denier views. It reminds us of John Armitage’s note of warning, that “cybercultural technologies, like all technologies, are innately political” (Armitage, 1999). In August Australia’s ABC TV ran a news item where bloggers, not politicians, were the key sources. Australia’s *Herald Sun* blogger Andrew Bolt was an interviewee. This his blog warning to a “lazy media”:

Many politicians tell me they’ve drawn on the blog for evidence to get their party to get tougher in resisting the global warming hysteria... But more than that, blogs like mine have given frustrated academics, even from India and Canada, a place to send dissenting material on global warming that much of the media prefers to ignore. A debate the media often says is “over” is on again. Thanks to blogs.^{xvii}

Analysis of online does need some healthy, well, scepticism. As Mathew Nisbet argues, the fragmentation of media has meant information rich science enthusiasts get richer, while the lay citizen becomes even further excluded from the debate (Nisbet, forthcoming). And in his book *Zero Comments*, Geert Lovink critiques blogs for their ‘nihilist impulse’ to undermine traditional media values through their in-crowd dynamic in which social ranking is the primary concern (Lovink, 2006). The rise of the issue enthusiast and lay expert is part of the ‘citizen journalism’

revolution and is providing, to quote online journalism blogger Paul Bradshaw, “more boots on the ground than any commercial news operation... more background, savvy and commitment to the case.”^{xviii} This has been rightly celebrated. But ascribing a “technological idealism” to the democratic potential of the Internet risks holding it apart from history and politics (Notaro, 2006). Anthony Watts and A Englishman’s Castle are boots on the ground, but ones leaving heavy footprints.

So there is volume, but what of its impact? In research to be published, Krosnick found that including a sceptical perspective in a news story about global warming reduced the proportion of those who perceived scientific consensus from 58 to 47 percent.^{xix}

It is perhaps a question of amplification, the ways in which message multipliers use the web to not only publish but proliferate.^{xx} In one of the few pieces of research addressing the issue, Ladle et al. tracked one climate science report published in the journal *Nature*, and found considerable misrepresentation of the report across the Internet from “self-styled ‘not-for-profit’ foundations with an explicit right-leaning political agenda” (Ladle et al., 2005). They found that “though there are relatively few anti-environmentalist sites on the Internet, they tend to rank high on search engines” due to optimization and in-crowd linking. The dangers of the amplification could result in, “web-literate laypersons [being] easily misled or polarised, undermining the considered public debate that underpins effective environmental policy” (ibid.).

Perhaps the best known example of political impact has been the work of sceptical blogger Steve McIntyre, whose criticisms of the hockey stick graph used in the IPCC reports led to a US Congressional Committee to examine its validity. And politicians are beginning to engage further with online. In June, Liberal Democrat MP and environment spokesperson Steve Webb launched a campaign with ‘ten green bloggers’ to influence the government to increase emissions reductions targets in the Climate Change Bill to 80%.^{xxi} He may have been following Al Gore’s recent surprise visit to the bloggers assembled at the Netroots Nation conference, telling them they “were on the leading edge of reclaiming American democracy.”^{xxii} And as Andreas Ytterstad says in his study of Norwegian blogger influence on government climate policy, misquoting H.G. Wells, it is surely the shape of things to come (Ytterstad 2008). According to Ofcom, UK use of online increased fourfold between 2002 and 2007.^{xxiii}

So what does this mean for new media’s democratic value? There is clearly a need for research into the ways in which climate scepticism online is free to contest scientific fact. But there is enough here already to put forward some of the ideas in circulation.

One of the founders of the Internet Vint Cerf, and lead for Google’s Internet for Everyone project, made a recent suggestion that the Internet should be nationalised as a public utility.^{xxiv} As tech policy blogger Jim Harper argues, “giving power over the Internet to well-heeled interests and self-interested politicians” is, and I quote, “a bad idea.”^{xxv}

Or in the UK every new online publication could be required to register with the recently announced Internet watchdog: from which at least the ownership and political economy of the web could be assessed. However, a tale from Belarus, where a law requiring registration with

the national government of every new blog has just been signed into force. Rightly, Reporters Without Borders called the law “repressive” and predict that censorship will increase.^{xxvi} Suppressing debate where it legitimately exists risks leaving the mainstream agenda open to dismissal. ‘Green bully’ and ‘religious environmentalist’ personas are invoked as evidence of hysteria at the heart of environmental commitment. In April this year, blogger Jo Abbess urged her readers to “challenge any piece of media that seems like it's been subject to spin or scepticism” after successfully petitioning the BBC’s Roger Harrabin to correct an error on the news website.^{xxvii} This was picked up by online magazine *The Register*, under the headline “Blog bully crows over BBC Climate Victory.”^{xxviii}

Ladle et al. advocate for “a clear, definitive, authoritative and realistic web resource written in accessible language that is explicit about the assumptions and limitations of the work... [and] a framework within which people can access information about new science, allowing them to access and judge information and its implications” (Ladle et al., 2005). While perhaps a utopian view, this does fit with the Habermasian “electronic agora” promoted by Rheingold and others, and almost describes Yale University’s new climate project, Yale 360.^{xxix}

Finally, in his book *The Future of the Internet: and How to Stop It*, Jonathan Zittrain builds on his idea of a ‘generative Internet’ that, borrowing from Chomsky, is predicated on the idea that finite tools—a PC, some code, enthusiasm—will lead to infinite new media freedoms. But Zittrain warns this is under threat from spam, viruses and malware, which for Becky Hogge, Founder of the Open Rights Group, are “turning people away from the Internet” into the arms of single networks tethered to corporate providers, such as Apple’s iPhone or Microsoft’s Xbox.^{xxx} I would argue that climate disinformation online is a form of cultural and political malware every bit as threatening to our new media freedoms, used not to foster a forum for open politics but to create, in Nancy Fraser’s term, a “multiplicity of fragmented publics” that harms not only our democracy, but our planet (Fraser, 1993).

I promised I wouldn’t be too miserable, so I’ll leave you with: last month, a two-part article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* was written solely in response to not even a blog writer, but a blog commenter, Jeff Huggins, who has relentlessly challenged the ways in which climate change has been represented.^{xxxi} As the scientists at RealClimate.org stated, these articles were “proof (if such were needed) that commenting on blogs can make a difference.”^{xxxii}

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ⁱ http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chi-poi-pachauri_thinkaug03,0,6989806.story

ⁱⁱ http://www.cjr.org/feature/climate_change_now_what.php

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/jul/16/climatechange.greenpolitics?gusrc=rss&feed=environment>

^{iv} http://scienceblogs.com/framing-science/2008/06/more_than_70_of_gop_congressio.php

^v <http://www.etcnewmedia.com/review/default.asp?SectionID=10>

^{vi} <http://www.etcnewmedia.com/review/default.asp?SectionID=11&CountryID=53>

^{vii} http://www.cjr.org/feature/climate_change_now_what.php

^{viii} <http://www.alexlockwood.net/2008/07/09/response-to-cristine-russell-climate-change-now-what/>

^{ix} <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/environment/article4690900.ece>

^x <http://www.newstatesman.com/scitech/2007/12/global-warming-temperature>

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^{xii} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jul/21/climatechange.scienceofclimatechange>

^{xiii} <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/07/29/climate-research-media-focus-whiplash/>

^{xiv} <http://www.blogherald.com/2008/02/11/how-many-blogs-are-there-is-someone-still-counting/>

^{xv} <http://wattsupwiththat.wordpress.com/2008/07/01/thanks-again-to-all-my-readers-another-record-month/>

^{xvi} Users visit on average 69 different sites each month, with 21 page views per domain http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/resources.jsp?section=pr_netv&nav=1

^{xvii} <http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,,24109727-25717,00.html>

^{xviii} <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=6&storycode=41820&c=1>

^{xix} http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/public_opinion_and_climate_par_1.php?page=all

^{xx} http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/3790/is_the_fourth_estate_a_fifth_column/

^{xxi} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jun/18/climatechange.Internet?gusrc=rss&feed=environment>

^{xxii} <http://www.onearth.org/blog/whats-happening-on-earth/who-we-gore-calls-upon-bloggers>

^{xxiii} http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/news/2008/08/nr_20080814

^{xxiv} <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/2008/06/29/should-the-Internet-be-nationalized/>

^{xxv} <http://techliberation.com/2008/06/27/cerf-nationalize-the-Internet/>

^{xxvi} http://www.editorsweblog.org/newspaper/2008/06/belarus_journalists_protest_new_media_la.php

^{xxvii} <http://portal.campaigncc.org/node/2089>

^{xxviii} http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/04/08/bbc_blog_bully/

^{xxix} <http://e360.yale.edu/>

^{xxx} <http://www.newstatesman.com/scitech/2008/06/generative-Internet-language>

^{xxxi} http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/public_opinion_and_climate_par.php

^{xxxii} <http://www.realclimate.org/index.php/archives/2008/08/friday-round-up/>