

Media and politicians must not be let lie about climate change

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This month, there was great concern among scientists worldwide at the public statement by Scott Pruitt, director of the US Environmental Protection Agency, that he remained unconvinced that carbon dioxide is a significant driver of global warming. Pressed on the issue in an interview with NBC, Pruitt stated “there is tremendous disagreement about the degree of impact, so . . . I would not agree that it’s a primary contributor to the global warming that we see”.

Pruitt’s statement directly contradicts the view of the agency led by him and is completely at variance with the findings of modern climate science. There is no “tremendous disagreement” about the impact of carbon dioxide emissions among climate scientists. For many years now, it has been accepted by the community that there is an unmistakable link between an increased concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (an increase directly attributable to human activity) and a measurable, inexorable warming of global climate.

It’s not just a question of rhetoric. Not long after Pruitt’s statement, the Trump administration published its first budget proposal. If passed by Congress, the budget will impose severe cutbacks in funding for climate-related research at major US government agencies such as the EPA, Nasa and the National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration. Not content with dismantling the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions by industry, the Trump administration intends to block attempts by the world’s premier earth science agencies to better understand our changing climate.

Climate scientists

How has it happened that, just as the threat of global climate change is becoming clear, the government of the world’s most powerful economy has decided to ignore the problem? While it would be easy to dismiss the approach of President Donald Trump and his allies to climate science as yet another sign of an unhinged, irrational administration, it is an uncomfortable truth that, on this topic at least, their approach is not untypical of any Republican presidency. For many years now, it has been an item of faith among conservative US politicians that the findings of climate scientists are heavily politicised.

To a trained scientist, this claim seems ludicrous – a quick glance at any textbook suggests that climate science is no more “politicised” than the theory of relativity or quantum mechanics. Certainly, it is striking the findings of climate scientists are regularly disputed by pundits and politicians of a particular hue – but this has nothing to do with climate science itself. Instead, it reflects what conservative voters have been told.

It is one of life’s great ironies that Trump himself has continually raised the issue of a reliable media. Of course, in Trump’s upside-down world, the “truthful” media comprises extreme right-wing outlets such as Fox News and Breitbart, while traditional outlets such as the *New York Times* and the BBC are dismissed as “fake news”. In the case of climate science, the phenomenon of unreliable reporting has long been a problem. For many years now, conservative media outlets have been spreading disinformation on this critical issue, claiming controversies where there are none, and dismissing the views of venerated scientific institutions in favour of pet views from cranks and vested interests. For example, the infamous “Climategate” story was an early example of a fake news story ruthlessly exploited by outlets such as Fox News.

Free speech

What can be done? It seems to me that the problem is serious enough to warrant a re-examination of the constraints we put on free speech in the media. As pointed out in the recent film *Denial*, some lies are simply too important to pass without sanction. It has always seemed strange to me that one cannot publish falsehoods about a particular person without punishment, yet a media report that is completely false and potentially damaging to society as a whole receives no sanction.

Few would disagree that a concerned citizen who smells smoke in a crowded cinema has the right to shout “Fire!”. But do citizens with a vested interest in the cinema have the right to shout him down? Surely it is not just a matter of one opinion against another. It is for this reason that it is important the public is informed by a reliable, unbiased media and that governments are advised by genuine experts. Journalists, political appointees and presidents who eschew the best scientific advice should be held accountable for their actions.

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