

ANALYSIS:

How The Wall Street Journal Opinion Section Presents Climate Change

RELIANCE ON FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY VOICES MISINFORMS READERS

Executive Summary: An analysis of 20 years of the Wall Street Journal's opinion pages on climate shows a consistent pattern that overwhelmingly ignores the science, champions doubt and denial of both the science and effectiveness of action, and leaves readers misinformed about the consensus of science and of the risks of the threat.

INTRODUCTION

The Wall Street Journal is the premier paper of the business world and one of the widest circulating daily papers in the United States. From small business owners to titans of industry to policy makers in state capitals and Washington, the Journal has long been a powerfully influential source of news for those responsible for turning a profit and setting economic policy. This report seeks to assess how the Journal's opinion section has portrayed climate change and the prospect of climate action over the past 20 years.

Researchers reviewed editorials, columns and op-eds available through the Journal's own archives, and through search engines LexisNexis and Proquest, turning up more than six hundred entries of opinion pieces relating to climate science or policy published between 1995 and May 31, 2016.

The opinion pages - editorials, columns, and op-eds - frame and inform the public debate and understanding of an issue. An editorial is an argument authored by members of a newspaper's editorial board, and presents the judgment of the paper as an institution. Columns feature the opinions of writers who consistently appear on these pages, while op-eds present the opinion of a guest author that the paper has granted its valuable pages to make their views public.

The reporting of the Journal is widely recognized as some of the best in the world. Yet this analysis indisputably shows that its opinion page has done its readers a disservice by consistently ignoring or ridiculing the scientific consensus on the reality and urgency of climate change, and in so doing minimizing the potential economic, social and environmental risks of climate change.

This analysis tracks years of lopsided discussion of an issue that every single major national science body agrees is a profound threat; such an out-of-balance view cannot help but hinder its readers' ability to make accurate assessments of the risk climate change poses to their businesses. The Journal's editorial pages make clear the publication's support for business, free markets and minimal regulation. However, failing to present a complete picture of any issue of public import is a failure of journalistic responsibility. There are many examples of a pro-business approach to climate action, but only rarely have they been presented in the Journal's opinion section.

MAIN FINDINGS

Editorials:

- Of 201 editorials dating back to 1997, none explicitly acknowledge that fossil fuels cause climate change.
- Editorials echo industry talking points and rhetoric that minimize climate risk and cast doubt on climate science.

Op-eds:

- Of the 279 op-eds published since 1995, 40 reflect mainstream climate science. That is 14 percent.
- The Wall Street Journal predominantly features writing by outside voices who argue against the validity of climate science or policies to reduce emissions. Authors' vested interests in fossil fuels are disclosed inconsistently.
- Op-eds are routinely criticized by mainstream scientists for their misleading claims and the misrepresentation of facts.

Columns:

- Of 122 columns published since 1997, four accept as fact that fossil fuels cause climate change, or endorse a policy to reduce emissions. That is three percent.

Of 100 op-eds, columns and editorials published between April 2015 and May 2016,¹ four op-eds and zero columns or editorials provided information reflecting mainstream science. As global heat records are broken with regularity and multiple studies² show 97 percent of climate science experts agree that fossil fuels are causing climate change, the Journal presents a worldview directly contrary. Of the last 100 op-eds, editorials and columns in the Journal's opinion section, 96 fail to acknowledge the link between human activity and climate change.

Of the 602 op-eds, columns and editorials published since 1995,³ only 44 of them treat fossil fuel-driven climate change as a reality. Just 7 percent of the op-eds, editorials and columns in the Journal's opinion section reflect the consensus of 97 percent of climate scientists, while the other 93 percent of its content reflects the opinion of 3 percent.

In its opinion section, the Wall Street Journal consistently highlights voices of those with vested interests in fossil fuels--though only sporadically are these industry ties disclosed. By routinely presenting only the dismissive side of the climate discussion, the Journal presents a skewed view that undermines a reader's ability to effectively evaluate climate risk, objectively assess potential solutions, and balance the two.

Downplaying established science and battling health protections is an established pattern for the Wall Street Journal's editorial board. The paper exhibited editorial bias on: the harmful health effects of tobacco; the safety and efficacy of airbags and seat belt laws;⁴ the danger of dioxin/Agent Orange;⁵ and other environmental threats.⁶

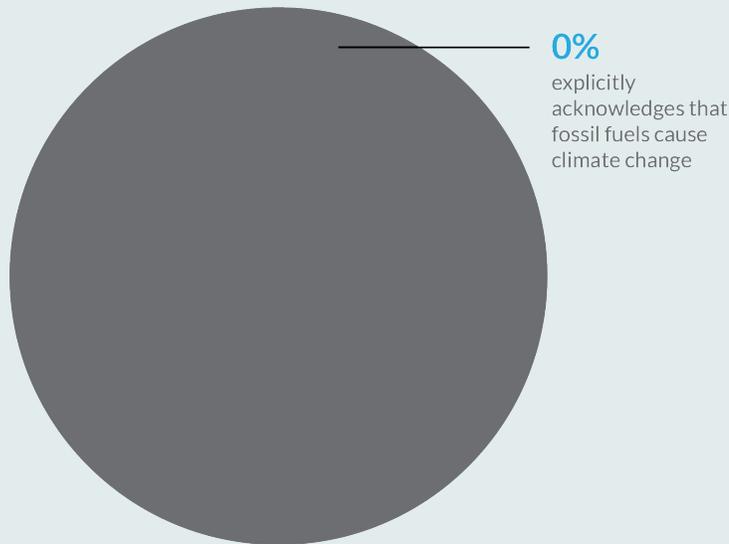
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL'S EDITORIAL STANCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Of the Journal's 201 editorials on climate change since 1997, not one acknowledges the overwhelming weight of scientific evidence that burning fossil fuels impacts the global climate.⁷

A lone editorial calls for action on climate. In a 2001 piece⁸ that questions the science of climate change, the board endorses the idea of implementing a cap-and-trade system instead of adopting the Kyoto Protocol. But when cap-and-trade emerged as a viable policy in 2007 with industry support,⁹ the editorial board changed its position and opposed such a plan in at least 18 editorials in the following years. The 2001 op-ed questions the reality of man-

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Editorials on Climate Change (1995-2016)



made climate change, but its pro-business cap and trade argument represents an approach the Journal editorial board could have taken to inform readers of a market-based solution to climate change.

Minimizing Climate Threats

The Wall Street Journal’s editorial board has repeatedly minimized the well-established scientific consensus on climate and fossil fuels, characterizing it as a “church of climatology,”¹⁰ “orthodoxy,”¹¹ and “the new religion on the left.”¹² This religiously-themed language has been shown to be propagated domestically and internationally by an interlocking network of fossil-fuel and industry-funded think tanks.¹³

The editorial board dismisses warnings from the Secretary of Defense¹⁴ about the national security threat posed by climate change, calling it a “speculative threat” and “hype and hysteria.” The Journal ignores these scientifically rigorous reports, and instead suggests that snow in February is cause for skepticism.¹⁵

Reliance on Industry Rhetoric

Analysis shows Wall Street Journal editorials often use fossil fuel industry-driven rhetoric. For example, the Wall Street Journal opposed¹⁶ the Clean Power Plan by suggesting that regulations on power plant emissions would

disproportionately harm the poor. That framing was identical to Peabody Energy's¹⁷ effort to rebrand coal as a "cure" for poverty, demonstrating the editorial board's willingness to embrace industry talking points as their own.

The same editorial cited a study by the National Black Chamber of Commerce about the Clean Power Plan's impact on minority communities, without disclosing that the National Black Chamber of Commerce gets most of its funding¹⁸ from companies that oppose the development of renewable energy. This evaluation of the Clean Power Plan's impact reflects only the views and analysis of groups whose funders have a monetary interest in blocking the regulations.

The most transparent example is the editorial board's use of the term "junk science"¹⁹ to describe global warming, as this is a term popularized by former tobacco lobbyist-turned-fossil fuel lobbyist²⁰ Steven Milloy, who owns and operates junkscience.com.

Misrepresenting Science

As 196 nations came together to sign the Paris climate agreement in December 2015, the Wall Street Journal cast doubt²¹ on the risk climate change poses. As the science increasingly points to impacts being seen here and now, a fact acknowledged²² by other editorial boards, the Journal remained steadfast in suggesting that effects that "may or may not have consequences that may or may not be costly"²³ are only "predicted decades away"²⁴ by "controversial computer models"²⁵ that are "far from definitive."²⁶

In 2013, in the midst of the hottest decade on record, the editorial board questioned the relationship between carbon dioxide and warming, asking, "If emitting CO₂ into the atmosphere causes global warming, why hasn't the globe been warming?"²⁷

The Wall Street Journal promoted²⁸ a report, instigated by Republican members of congress, criticizing Dr. Michael Mann's "hockey stick"²⁹ study. The report was later discredited by news agencies, including USA Today,³⁰ as its scientific underpinning was retracted from the journal that published it. The report was shown to be plagiarized in part from Wikipedia.

Similarly, the Journal's editorial board praised in two different editorials³² a study³³ published in *Climate Research* that was so flawed it resulted in a mass resignation of half the scientific journal's editors,³⁴ and an admission that it should never have been published by a lead editor. One of the study's authors³⁵ was later revealed to have taken more than \$1 million in funding

from the fossil fuel industry. The editorial citing this flawed study argued that the hockey stick graph was false. Multiple subsequent studies have confirmed the graph's validity.³⁶

Wall Street Journal editorials frequently explore worst-case scenarios³⁷ for emission reduction policies, and use political opposition to claim that best-case scenarios are unrealistic.

Editorials present as fact³⁸ the projected economic costs of climate policies by special interest groups, but ignore the cost of inaction presented by independent scientists, or by Senator John McCain³⁹ and other Republicans⁴⁰--who represent rare voices of dissent in the Journal's opinion section.

The Journal's editorial board published a number of pieces about "Climategate," the leak of climate scientists' emails in 2009. The editorial board penned at least six pieces on the controversy. Eight formal investigations⁴¹ found zero evidence of scientific misconduct. Despite the appetite to editorialize on the perceived scandal before the investigations, the Journal did not cover the exoneration to correct the record.

The editorial board has reliably defended corporations like ExxonMobil⁴² and other individuals⁴³ and organizations⁴⁴ accused⁴⁵ of various forms of professional or academic misconduct.

OP-EDS: WHO THE JOURNAL CHOOSES TO PUBLISH

Few of the Wall Street Journal's editorials focus on science, instead focusing on politics. In 2009 for example, the Journal published nine editorials opposing cap and trade.⁴⁶ Op-eds, however, frequently deal with science but are often written by authors with a vested interest in the fossil fuel industry. While op-eds are not the opinion of the editorial board, the authors the paper chooses to publish is a reflection of the voices and opinions the editors deem worthy of valuable space on the opinion page.

The clearest example of editorial bias in the opinion section lies in the Wall Street Journal's decision to not to publish⁴⁷ a letter⁴⁸ about the integrity of climate science signed by 255 members of the National Academies of Science. The Journal later ran an op-ed⁴⁹ headlined "No need to panic about global warming" by 16 climate change skeptics, eight of whom have fossil fuel industry ties,⁵⁰ and only four of whom had published peer-reviewed climate science articles.⁵¹ The op-ed was quickly debunked by independent reporters,

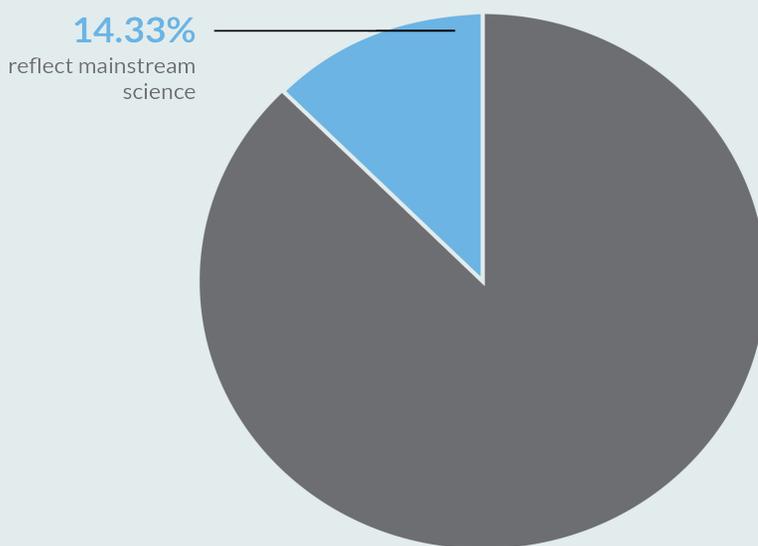
scientists and experts as, “dismal,”⁵² “all spin,”⁵³ and described as a “textbook example of misleading prose”⁵⁴ that “completely misrepresented”⁵⁵ the work it cited, according to that study’s author. In response, the Journal published a 500-word letter⁵⁶ from 38 mainstream scientists, less than half the length of the op-ed that started the uproar.

Of the 279 op-eds examined, the 40 that reflected mainstream science were mostly authored by CEOs⁵⁷ of major corporations like BP,⁵⁸ and high-ranking Republicans like President George W. Bush’s Council of Economic Advisers chairman, who argued against the Kyoto protocol,⁵⁹ but acknowledged that fossil fuels cause climate change. A 2003 op-ed by Senator John McCain explains how to “Fight Global Warming For \$20 a Year.”⁶⁰ The CEO of Duke Energy advocated for nuclear power⁶¹ in 2009, and the CEO of Boeing discussed⁶² his company’s emissions reductions efforts as well. There are also examples of pieces that advocate⁶³ for natural gas as a way to reduce emissions,⁶⁴ and promote nuclear⁶⁵ power and clean coal.⁶⁶

These op-eds show that there are ways for a conservative, pro-business worldview to engage on climate change without embracing regulations. These views are only rarely presented by the Journal.

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Op-Eds on Climate Change (1995-2016)



Voices with Vested Interests

The Wall Street Journal has published at least 10 op-eds by Matt Ridley, a former columnist for the Journal, as well as author, advisor to the well-known climate skeptic group the Global Warming Policy Foundation,⁶⁷ and member of the British House of Lords. In a 2015 interview⁶⁸ with DeSmog UK, Ridley admitted that his family's ownership of a coal mine may bias him, but claimed he's "always declared" his "vested interest in carbon dioxide emissions." Yet seven of his ten Wall Street Journal pieces did not disclose this information; four of the omissions occurred after a disclosure in 2012.⁶⁹

Ridley is not the only example of an inconsistent disclosure policy, as the Wall Street Journal has published at least 22 op-eds⁷⁰ by Robert Bryce, Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, 13 of which are skeptical of the viability of wind power. None of them disclose that The Manhattan Institute has received more than \$2 million⁷¹ from the Koch Family Foundations. As the Koch family's fortune is built on fossil fuels, their opposition to renewable energy through funded surrogates like Bryce would be helpful context for readers.

Similarly, when the opinion page publishes op-eds by Steve Hayward of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), they failed to disclose his AEI affiliation in three of four op-eds. AEI is funded by the fossil fuel industry⁷² (and the tobacco industry) with major donations from the Kochs and ExxonMobil. Also undisclosed is the fact that Hayward is Treasurer⁷³ for the Donors Capital Fund,⁷⁴ one of a pair of groups⁷⁵ described by The Guardian as "a secretive funding route to channel nearly \$120m (£77m) to more than 100 groups casting doubt about the science behind climate change." According to researcher⁷⁶ Robert Brulle, Donors Capital Fund and its sister group Donors Trust are responsible for "about one-quarter of the funding of the climate countermovement."

The journal often fails to disclose the fossil-fuel industry ties of its op-ed authors or the experts commonly quoted in editorial content, such as: Fred Singer,⁷⁷ director of the fossil fuel-funded⁷⁸ Science and Environmental Policy Project; Pat Michaels⁷⁹ of the University of Virginia, who independently disclosed that some 40 percent of his funding comes from fossil fuels;⁸⁰ James Glassman,⁸¹ a resident fellow of AEI and host of TechCentralStation, a now defunct industry-funded blog⁸² created by the public relations firm DCI Group; and Frederick Seitz,⁸³ chairman of the George C. Marshall Institute⁸⁴ and former tobacco consultant.

Scientifically Inaccurate Op-Eds Mislead Readers

Having a “vested interest” in an issue by no means invalidates one’s opinion or means a writer is de facto being dishonest. But the op-eds published by the Wall Street Journal are debunked by fact checkers for making “several incorrect claims”⁸⁶ and routinely panned by academics.

Over the past two decades, the scientific understanding of climate change has evolved and reached a strong consensus⁸⁷ similar to the consensus on the age of the universe or the consensus on the causal link between tobacco and cancer. Yet, misrepresentations of the facts of climate change continue to dominate Wall Street Journal editorials, op-eds and columns.

A 2012 report found⁸⁸ that 81 percent of the representations of climate science in the Wall Street Journal’s opinion section were misleading (39 out of 48 instances.)

Another independent assessment comes from the online Scientific Trust Tracker, where climate scientists have rated four op-eds⁸⁹ published in the Wall Street Journal since 2015 as having “low” to “very low” scientific credibility, and that overall the opinions published by the Journal are “consistently found to be at odds with current scientific knowledge.”⁹⁰

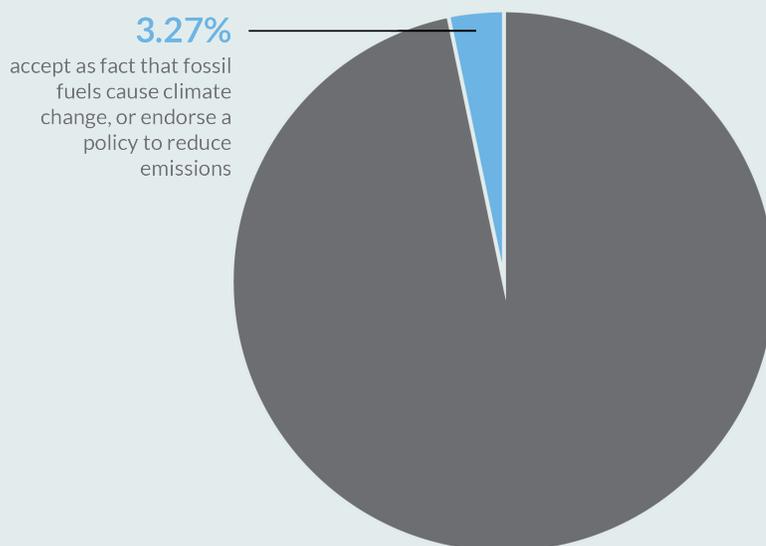
In 2013, the Journal published a piece, “In Defense of Carbon Dioxide,”⁹¹ by authors who had never published peer-reviewed climate science, and have ties⁹² to fossil fuel-funded organizations that the Wall Street Journal failed to disclose to its readers. Scientists and journalists criticized⁹³ the piece, saying the op-ed exhibits a “breath-taking illogic and intellectual legerdemain”⁹⁴ with arguments that “don’t even come close to passing a scientific smell test;” that it serves to “manufacture doubt”⁹⁵ by “recycling long debunked myths”⁹⁶ with an argument Michael Svodova of Yale identified⁹⁷ as part of a larger fossil fuel industry effort to defend CO₂; and Columbia Journalism Review’s Ryan Chittum called it “numbskullery” that was “shameful even by the dismal standards of that page.”⁹⁸

This bias continues, with one 2016 piece that “contorts and misrepresents facts, deliberately misleads with disinformation, and demonstrates either his lack of knowledge or willful ignorance of the science.”⁹⁹

Dr. Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute, lays the blame¹⁰⁰ for inaccuracies on the Wall Street Journal’s editors. In response to a September

2014 Matt Ridley op-ed¹⁰¹ mischaracterizing the findings of a paper published in Science Magazine, Sachs wrote that if the editors “had simply gone online to read the actual paper, they would have found that the paper’s conclusions are the very opposite of Ridley’s.”

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL Columns on Climate Change (1995-2016)



CONCLUSION: IRRESPONSIBLE BIAS

There is no shortage of critics of The Wall Street Journal’s opinion section, which they say exhibits a “remarkable editorial bias”¹⁰² that “fails businesses” and “would cost the U.S. its global leadership” if taken “as fact.”¹⁰³

The Wall Street Journal’s opinion section gives readers a distorted understanding of climate change. This does a disservice to the Journal’s audience--particularly their business audience--which relies on accurate information to plan for the impact of climate impacts and environmental regulations. By mixing political attacks with scientific misinformation, the Journal introduces undue uncertainty, casting doubt on solid science while promoting fringe opinions, often from authors with a “vested interest” in fossil fuels.

METHODOLOGY

These findings are the result of an effort to catalog the Wall Street Journal's opinion section coverage of climate change and global warming. Using wsj.com, LexisNexis and ProQuest, researchers searched for the phrases "climate change" and "global warming," creating a database with date of publication, author, and type of article.

The results were then read in full to categorize and determine whether the opinion reflected the mainstream science or industry-preferred skepticism of the link between fossil fuels and climate change. The database is publicly available at: <http://www.partnershipforresponsiblegrowth.org/research-1/climatenexusdatabase>

Columns were categorized but not discussed at length in this paper, though they exhibit the same bias as the editorials and op-eds. Letters to the editor were dismissed for technical reasons (multiple letters exist on a single URL) and because their purpose is often to oppose the opinions presented by a paper.

This report was researched and produced by Climate Nexus.

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