

A tipping point in climate journalism

By Adriana Pérez, environment reporter at the Chicago Tribune

Whatever the reasons and justifications of our protagonists, there's another crucial element to our story. It's how the mass media became complicit, as a wide spectrum of the media—not just obviously right-wing newspapers like the *Washington Times*, but mainstream outlets, too—felt obligated to treat these issues as scientific controversies. Journalists were constantly pressured to grant the professional deniers equal status—and equal time and newsprint space—and they did. Eugene Linden, once an environment reporter for *Time* magazine, commented in his book *Winds of Change* that “members of the media found themselves hounded by experts who conflated scientific diffidence with scientific uncertainty, and who wrote outraged letters to the editor when a report didn't include their dissent.”¹⁶⁶ Editors evidently succumbed to this pressure, and reporting on climate in the United States became biased toward the skeptics and deniers because of it.

We've noted how the notion of balance was enshrined in the Fairness Doctrine, and it may make sense for political news in a two-party system (although not in a multiparty system). But it doesn't reflect the way science works. In an active scientific debate, there can be many sides. But once a scientific issue is closed, there's only one “side.” Imagine providing “balance” to the issue of whether the Earth orbits the Sun, whether continents move, or whether DNA carries genetic information. These matters were long ago settled in scientists' minds. Nobody can publish an article in a scientific journal claiming the Sun orbits the Earth, and for the same reason, you can't publish an article in a peer-reviewed journal claiming there's no global warming. Probably well-informed professional science journalists wouldn't publish it either. But ordinary journalists repeatedly did.

My journey

- Burned out from breaking news; at a tipping point myself
- *The Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway
 - Delves into the role of mass media in obscuring truth, from tobacco to climate change
- “Vocation is where one’s greatest joys meets the world’s greatest need”
- The next 4 years will be crucial — and journalism will be all the more essential to the Fourth Estate in keeping government in check and balanced
 - Reorientation toward fossil fuels and walking back climate action from the last few years

Climate touches everything

If **everyone** is a climate reporter,

AND climate reporters are **everything** reporters...

- Then climate cannot be a last-minute add or second thought
- Every beat relates to climate and climate relates back to it:

How does [insert topic] affect climate? How does climate affect [insert topic]?

So let go of what you think you're (in)capable of: science, economy, maths, etc.

- As journalist, we are “words” people ... but also good learners

Climate touches everyone

Across the political spectrum, Gen Z & Millennials worry (85%) & want action (77%)

Breakdown:	Republicans	Democrats	Independent
Worried	74%	96%	86%
Want action	70%	83%	77%

Young people who have experienced more types of severe weather were likelier to strongly endorse action plans *regardless* of their party affiliation

As climate change intensifies and widens its reach, these feelings will only grow. But that's an **opportunity** for engagement

Ask for help

Covering Climate Now: [Climate Change Reporting 101](#)

Climate Central: reports, experts and Climate Shift Index at [climatecentral.org](#)

SciLine: experts and training at [sciline.org](#)

Climate Concierge at Columbia University: [conciierge.iri.columbia.edu](#)

Science Communication Network: [sciencecommunicationnetwork.org](#)

500 Women Scientists: [500womenscientists.org](#)

BIPOC PhDs: [climate.donorsofcolor.org/bipoc-phds](#)

Contextualizing climate stories

Ask, “How does this story fit into climate change?”

NOT “How does climate change fit into this story?”

Three pillars from Covering Climate Now: Humanize, localize, solutionize

Avoid platforming **deniers** AND ALSO parroting **greenwashing/PR** spins

- That includes scrutinizing solutions: Explore how they might and might **not** work. Include **critics**. **Follow up** on promises!

Advice from an early-career journalist

- **You never know when you'll bump into a story**
- Reasonably **separate work and life**. Log off your professional email on weekends
- In climate reporting, **there's no competition**
- Getting started will always be a **learning curve**. Don't feel discouraged!
- **You're never going to make everyone happy**, so decide whose opinion matters to you
- If you wonder whether you're making an impact, **you're on the right track**
- **Set yourself apart!** With your writing style, your language skills, etc.
- Make yourself **reliable**



Reading suggestions :)

Blogs

- From Nieman Reports: [Five Tips for Better Coverage of the Climate Crisis](#)
- From Bloomberg: [What Trump's Victory Means for Climate](#)
- From Covering Climate Now: [Telling the Truth Isn't Partisan](#)

Reporting

- From Grist: [Boots on the Ground](#) - As FEMA struggles to keep up with climate disasters, extremist groups see an opportunity
- From Vox: [Expecting worse: Giving birth on a planet in crisis](#) - How climate change transforms our reproductive lives, from menstruation to fertility to pregnancy

q&a

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