

Bird, H., Boykoff, M., Goodman, M. K., Monbiot, G. & Littler, J. (2009). The media and climate change. *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 43, pp. 47-64. doi: 10.3898/136266209790424595



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**Original citation:** Bird, H., Boykoff, M., Goodman, M. K., Monbiot, G. & Littler, J. (2009). The media and climate change. *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 43, pp. 47-64. doi: 10.3898/136266209790424595

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## **The media and climate change**

Helen Bird, Max Boykoff, Mike Goodman and George Monbiot discuss media coverage of climate change with Jo Littler.

How has the media coverage of climate change changed in recent years?

**Helen** It's risen hugely up the agenda and is no longer in its little green box. There's more of a general consensus that climate change is happening, and that it's manmade, but areas of contention remain around how we actually tackle it.

**Mike** People are now confronted with climate change when they go to movies and watch TV, not just on the news, and this also raises a whole range of new political questions about its mediation.

**Max** It's primarily in the mid to late 1980s that it came into the public arena. This was when in North America, James Hansen - often considered the godfather of climate change -- told the Senate it was time to take action, and in Britain Thatcher spoke of the need to respond at the Royal Society. Media coverage vastly increased in 2006 and 2007, but recently it's dropped off a bit. This is partly because of the focus on the recession, but it's also because of the emergence of newer ways of talking about climate change without discussing it explicitly – for example, in the broader frame of 'sustainability'. The way coverage is translated into content is another issue. The general trend has been to move away from scientific questions and into questions of impact, policy action and how it translates into our everyday behaviour.

**George** Climate change denial in the media has become simultaneously less pervasive and more prominent. What I mean by that is that you don't now get a situation where almost everyday on the BBC someone like Pat Michaels is given undisputed access without having to reveal their special interests, to claim that the science is unsettled and the debate still open.. But at the same time, there's been a series of extremely prominent instances of denial, such as The Great Global Warming Scandal on Channel 4 and Christopher Monckton's major feature series in The Sunday Telegraph, which have increased doubt in the public mind about whether or not climate change is taking place. A couple of recent polls have shown clearly that more people believe that the science is unsettled today than they did five years ago. That's partly because of the tremendous publicity efforts that some parts of the media have invested in such prominent features.

Has the climate change denial industry expanded?

**George** It's hard to tell because, of course, one of the characteristics of the industry is that it doesn't publish annual accounts and is very careful to cover its tracks. In other words, it's very hard to know who's funded by whom, except when it comes to Exxon, which was foolish enough to publish its list of beneficiaries in its annual accounts. However, that they're better organised is unquestionable. They organise fake referenda, and major conferences where they assemble what they claim are 'the world's greatest climate scientists' to speak with one voice in dismissing climate science. And they've learnt what works best to seed public doubt. Every time I write about climate change in The Guardian, I'll get several

hundred website comments vociferously denying that it could possibly be taking place. Of those, how many are sponsored? I haven't the faintest idea, and, in common with all other websites, The Guardian's policy of allowing anonymity creates tremendous scope for inserting yourself into a debate and representing unacknowledged interests.

**Max** They're better organised in that they've abandoned the issues that make them look like real fossils. When they raise doubt over the existence of climate change they simply demonstrate their own ineptitude. Where they are getting better organised, as Eric Pooley points out, is by pushing the idea of the 'economic costs' of green policy (which overlooks the real economic costs of negligence). It's very easy to raise a spectre of doubt, but much more difficult to cover the steady evolution of scientific understanding of human contributions to climate change. I find it frustrating when these kinds of scientific issues are put in the form of public polls: 'Do you think the climate is changing?' 'Do you think humans contribute to climate change?' Whether or not we want it to be the case is another issue, but we've allowed ourselves to conflate scientific issues into opinion, to turn it into a referendum of sorts.

**George** Al Gore has now become the lightning rod for a lot of the denialist discourse. Whenever they don't like a computer model, they say it's 'an Al Gore-ithm': he's become a target for the most extraordinary campaign of vitriol. My impression of the deniers is that they haven't really changed their arguments; they just throw anything and everything they've got at everyone all the time. So, if it's, say, a frosty day, that proves that climate change isn't taking place. If there's the word 'probably' in a scientific paper, that proves it's a flaw. They're completely unscrupulous, and I don't think they've refined their targets so much as refine their methods.

**Mike** One question that needs discussing is the way they fundamentally misunderstand what science is and how it works.

**George** I don't think they misunderstand it. I think they rely on the fact that the public misunderstands it or they can exploit or create a misunderstanding. These people have the luxury of not having to be right. All they need to do is to create doubt and confusion and throw dust in our eyes, and they do that with any and every method. There are also journalists who genuinely just do not understand the science. Christopher Booker in The Sunday Telegraph is a very good example of this. He would not know scientific methodology if it bit him on the arse, but he confidently repeats the lies which are put out by people who are sponsored by fossil fuel companies. I've no evidence at all that he is sponsored by them; he just approaches the subject with a complete absence of scepticism.

There are also distinctions between how different countries deal with this issue. Alex Lockwood for instance has compared English and Scottish newspaper coverage of climate change. He notes that the Scotsman is very involved in the Scottish Stop Climate Chaos campaign, and that its coverage tends to ask questions about what can be done, productively, to solve these issues: e.g. what questions they can raise, or how can they lobby about aviation. Whereas the English newspaper industry - *even though it's quite variegated* - tends to have a much more conservative tenor overall.

**Max** The distinction between broadsheets and tabloids is also important, as is the question of who the journalists are. Many of these journalists talk about giving readers what they want - and having a working-class audience is something that the tabloid press journalists that I spoke with keep very much in mind. In our research into UK tabloid press coverage of climate change 2000-2006 Maria Mansfield and I noted the very heavy reliance on dramatic events such as floods or heatwaves. There's also a focus on what Mike Goodman and I call 'charismatic megafauna': celebrities, polar bears and sharks. You can actually bet at William Hill about when you're going to see the first great white shark off the UK coast.

**Mike** And that papers over a lot of the more fundamental and institutional questions, around decarbonisation that could impact on exactly this working-class readership. This is the same segment of society that'll be at the forefront of climate impact, yet these aren't the kinds of stories that get covered. It's the polar bear, sharks and celebrities.

**George** This also exemplifies a trend for sections of the media to both overemphasise and get the story wildly wrong: polar bears being 'especially endangered' by global warming is one such example. Then the media as a body will turn on those who have massively overemphasised polar bears and got it wrong, and blame environmentalists and scientists for the distortion, when in fact it's entirely an artefact of media reporting. We see this happening time and time again. The Ice Age story is another example: they say, 'Oh well, people were saying in the 1970s that there was going to be a new Ice Age'. And when you actually pin it down, you find that almost all the people saying that were journalists, some of whom were writing for the very magazines which are now saying that global warming can't be taking place 'because some people were saying in the '70s that the Ice Age was coming'.

*The IPPR have called this kind of dramatic reportage 'climate porn' - Although there is an argument that it's a necessary shock to the system if it creates the acknowledgement that there's a problem.*

**Helen** Human beings are partly short-term beings. We respond to immediate threats and climate change doesn't fall into that category yet. Some media are constantly trying to generate the big dramatic event that we need to notice, but this is a much longer term and more complex threat than any of those stories would paint it.

**George** I think we needed climate porn because there is a genuine problem here, and it's not been entirely cooked up by journalists. They have to try to make people interested in a subject which is not very 'newsy' and doesn't really fit into the standard package for generating public interest. The events are very slow moving, on the whole. They take a very long time to gestate, and that means the simple cause-and-effect which makes a standard news story is just not there. So journalists have, to an extent, to manufacture that if they're going to maintain public interest. They have to turn a trend into an event, when climate change isn't really about events. It's about slow grinding processes which you have to illustrate somehow. So when a big chunk of ice calves into the sea, or when a drought or heatwave or any weird weather strikes, the temptation is to say, hah! this is climate change, this is a result of what the scientists have been talking about. In doing so, you run the risk of stepping beyond the bounds of what science allows. I have the luxury of being permitted to be boring; a columnist is expected to talk about things with a degree of complexity. But it's a genuine dilemma for journalists at the other end of the spectrum. If you're on Radio One's Newsbeat, how do you

discuss it in a way which is both true to the science and can be represented in tiny packages and the grabby fashion which Newsbeat demands? I don't really know the answer to that.

**Max** This 'climate porn' label is just not that helpful. The IPPR raised a question to help us reflect on how climate change is being portrayed and how journalists are carrying out their work, but the term conflates too many different issues. It doesn't help us get at some of the texture that's involved. This subject needs to be covered in its complexity and the 'climate porn' accusation had many journalists who were beginning to move into environmental issues retreating a bit. There are glaciers that are calving on a regular basis: these things are happening, and to paint them as always being 'climate porn' ends up being more of a problem than a help.

What about celebrity involvement in endorsing environmental activism; is that more of a help or a hindrance?

**Mike** In terms of new ways of mediating and speaking about climate change, celebrities really stand out. As well as obvious figures like Al Gore and Leonardo DiCaprio, every other celebrity in Heat magazine is talking about saving the planet. How that's played out is just fascinating to us. We started with its ambiguities: when you have a celebrity talking about climate change and getting people to change their behaviour, what do you gain and what do you lose? Are they simply extending their brand by becoming the environmental celebrity, or are they able to use that amplified voice - which Bono says is a form of currency - in a particular way? And the 'effects' of such views is a large empirical question which nobody's really done any work on.

**Max** Yes - a whole host of questions can be raised here. For example, when Emma Thompson speaks out over the third runway at Heathrow, the response is, 'well, she ought to think about how *she's* travelling'. These folks can be dismissed with their Chelsea tractors and their various highly consumptive activities, but they can also form bridges between insular academic spaces, boring scientists and the lives of everyday people.

**Helen** Our experience at Friends of the Earth is that celebrity works if you choose one with a real interest in the issue. Our 'Big Ask' campaign, which came to an end when the Climate Change Bill became an Act - a world first for the UK - was backed by 200,000 people who all lobbied their MPs. Tom Yorke from Radiohead was the celebrity advocate who took that message out for us. That was extremely helpful, not least because as he's a well-informed, credible figure for us to work with, as Radiohead have changed the way they operate as a band. They take as few flights as possible when touring, they don't use any disposable cups - those kinds of things: they live what they preach, and their support was very helpful in mobilising the mass political pressure that we needed. This wasn't about getting people to recycle more: it was about putting pressure on specific points within the system in order to generate change.

**George** This illustrates why it's difficult to generalise about celebrities, because the quality of engagement that you get from someone like Tom is rather different from that of someone like Coolio, who on Celebrity Big Brother described climate change as having nothing to do with manmade processes. The fact that someone is a celebrity doesn't actually

say much about what they bring to the debate. Even at the apparently ‘better informed’ end of the spectrum, you can draw a massive distinction between people like Tom Yorke and Brian Eno, on the one hand, and Bob Geldof and Bono on the other. Yorke and Eno have both demonstrated that they have an extremely good grasp of the issues and its complexities: they consult widely, they’re well-informed, they don’t speak until they’ve got something sensible to say. Whereas, in all their anti-poverty work, Geldof and Bono made idiots of themselves at every turn and spoke on behalf of people for whom they had no right to speak; they managed to destroy the causes that they claimed to support and to supplant a call of justice with a call for charity, whilst greatly boosting the credibility of a group of G8 leaders who were actually doing as little as possible for the poor and for development. They completely failed to understand the complexities and the hazards of their engagement. Whereas people like Tom Yorke and Brian Eno very plainly do understand. They’re politically savvy operators.

**Mike** It’s not always simple. Many celebrities have taken very little credit for the work they’ve done, and some celebrities have been attacked for reasons not necessarily related to their level of knowledge on these issues. Take Al Gore: the size of his house in Tennessee doesn’t demonstrate that climate change is not happening. On the other hand, Robert Redford quietly gathered together mayors to co-operate across the country and push climate mitigation activities on a sub-national level. You can criticise these folks, but it needs to be acknowledged that they’re raising awareness about these issues in particular ways.

**George** There are also some celebrities on the other side of the fence. Michael Crichton and David Bellamy, for example, are both used with varying effect and great enthusiasm by climate change deniers. Bellamy seems to be using climate change denial as a desperate last-ditch attempt to re-establish his celebrity. He comes out with increasingly bizarre statements, which are immediately broadcast throughout denier networks around the world.

*So where are the ‘progressive’ media spaces in relation to climate change?*

**Helen** The Guardian is pretty cutting-edge on its approach to climate change. If you read its annual report, it’s an important part of the way they conceptualise their business: they’re trying to integrate it right across the board, not just through their articles.

*Yes, which highlights how ‘the media’ involves people, buildings, distribution, transportation and machinery, as well as ‘representation’.*

**Max** On-line news coverage now gets around a lot of the classic hackneyed challenges that are facing media coverage. There’s more readers, more potential for collaboration and interaction between the media and ‘the public’, and more space to walk through the contours of issues. So on-line journalism is potentially a promising way forward, although there’s the socio-economic dimension of who has access.

It can also be a medium where destructive voices travel incredibly quickly, as the online climate-denier networks illustrate.

**George** Real Climate’s been very effective. I will read some utter nonsense published in The Daily Mail or The Sunday Telegraph and think, well, I know some of the reasons why this is

nonsense but, because I'm not a climate scientist, I don't have a fully formed view. Then you go to Real Climate and there they are busily explaining exactly how those journalists got it wrong. Grist is ahead of the curve too. And bloggers like Deltoid, Green Fire and Stoa are also very effective at correcting media misconceptions. Real Climate was founded by a collective of climate scientists including Gavin Schmidt and Michael Mann, and it's wonderful to see them coming out at last. About ten years ago a group of us environmentalists wrote a letter to Nature saying, where the heck are the scientists? Why are we having to carry the can in defending your science against its detractors? We're not qualified to do so. We're fighting with one hand tied behind our backs because we don't have the scientific information immediately at our fingertips. You are qualified to do this. Why aren't you fighting? At the time, there were very few climate scientists coming out and launching counterattacks against those who were telling lies about their science. But that's really changed. That's one of the things which has changed most noticeably.

Many scientists now realise it's no longer enough simply to publish your papers in obscure journals and assume that people will be enlightened and change their policies accordingly. You now have to go out and fight for your discipline, and engage in very unpleasant battles: but there are battles that people like myself, who aren't properly qualified to fight, have had to fight for the past twenty-five years. I can completely understand the scientists' reluctance to dirty their hands with this, but they have to. So these sites were set up partly as a counterweight, in response to other websites established by deniers like Climate Audit, or Anthony Watts's site, which are used every week by journalists, particularly in Britain and Canada and Australia, who constantly pick up the nonsense promulgated.

**Helen** There's also a lot of awareness of new media's potential after Obama's win. It's no longer enough just to talk to people who are interested in green issues: we have to build movements with charities, development and poverty campaigners, faith groups, and to start spreading, because actually climate change affects everybody's interests in all sorts of different ways. Because FOE is an activism-based organisation, clearly we need the web to rally people, to get messages to those in power, whether MEPs, MPs, local councillors or whoever. For example we had a digital green film competition this year which reached out to audiences who use social networking sites but don't really know that much about Friends of the Earth or climate change.

Have green organisations have been slower off the mark in using digital media?

**George** I think they have. When you look at websites of organisations like MoveOn or websites like the Daily Kos, for example, they're well ahead of environmentalists, who have been slow to mobilise online; but then progressive causes in general have been slow to mobilise online.

**Max** I also think the scale of response that's needed can get lost in a lot of these discussions. In the UK there have been polls that reduce climate mobilisation to recycling. Then, with these recent issues about the recycling industry falling apart, some people may say, well, forget about it - I'm just going to throw my crap away now. It's ridiculous. Firstly, that we think that we can only, or properly, address these kinds of large questions by recycling our wares is a really dangerous state of affairs. But secondly, if more voices can be mobilised through the Internet to connect up and create movement towards decarbonisation, it's a

promising way forward.

**Helen** Though recycling's not an answer on its own, it's important that people show that actions like recycling matter to them, in order to give politicians the confidence to act. There are massive systemic problems here too: industrial waste, levels of consumption, built-in obsolescence. Those are things much bigger than individual action: they also involve rallying around changing the system itself.

So how would you view something like the Daily Mail's *anti*-plastic bag campaign?

**George** It's interesting to contrast it with the Daily Mail's light bulb campaign. It does seem completely arbitrary because it's no greater burden on people - it's rather a lesser burden for people to change their incandescent light bulbs than to stop using plastic bags. In fact people are currently being threatened with the dreadful prospect of saving money with a new technology which actually lasts a lot longer than the old one. Why the Daily Mail chose to make a big issue of this is a bit of a mystery. All it suggests really is that they have no consistent view and no consistent policy. They'll just press whatever button they think would be good for sales that week.

**Mike** The Mail getting people to change their environmental behaviour makes me think about the extent to which environmentalism is now mainstream. It raises some big questions: has this defused the political salience of environmentalism as a form of movement politics? Or is it now where we want it to be - in the spaces of the everyday? Because I see both things happening: the No.1 retailer of organic foods now is Walmart/Asda; M&S has its 'plan A'; we can go to the shops and buy energy-saving light bulbs. That means you've lost that distinctly anti-corporate point of critique to mobilise people as a movement, to get them to change their behaviour at a larger structural level. It raises the issue of whether mainstreaming is going in the direction we want to go, or if it means the loss of the movement politics that we used to have in the 1980s?

*It's both, isn't it? That's why it's so simultaneously encouraging and ominous. The potential for greenwash is so huge and yet so is the potential for people to get involved in ways they couldn't twenty years ago.*

**George** By and large, our movements, of which environmentalism is one, have been good at occasional spectacular demonstrations and temporary mobilisations. They've been bad at following through. It's really only professional NGOs who've been able to sustain their campaigning. The ad hoc alliances that have supplied the big numbers and great spectaculars and the presence on the streets come and go with extraordinary volatility and demonstrate a complete failure to sustain pressure in order to achieve any particular political ends. By themselves they're not enough. We've seen that with opposition to war, with opposition to a particular form of globalisation, and to the IMF and to the World Bank, as well as with one environmental issue after another.

**Helen** So much media champions short-term, individualistic reasons to be outraged: we're all under attack, our health is under threat. But there's actually a role for taking a much wider view of what their readers wellbeing is made up of. Championing fossil fuels that are going to



fizzle out in twenty years, after we've all been subjected to massive price hikes, and when people, their children and their health have been put at risk: is that really in their readers' interests? Media should take a much more holistic view of their readers wellbeing, and ask: what should we be championing? They could take a wider view of well-being, by looking at our responsibilities as a global community, and helping drive some of that long-term, sustained political pressure that's needed.

**George** What you say ties in very closely with George Marshall's argument in Carbon Detox. He applies psychological marketing methods to climate change, and discovers that, to a large extent, we've been getting it badly wrong. People are not persuaded by 'information', or people outside their social circle putting forward arguments with which they're unfamiliar. The people who persuade them are people within a fairly narrow pre-existing social circle, their own family and friends. The way you penetrate that circle from outside is not with information or argument but with narrative, and you have to be able to tell a story that makes them feel better about themselves. You need to change the discourse to reassure people that, if they bother to get their heads round the science, they are the smart people; and the people who close their eyes and shut their ears to the science are dumb people who aren't keeping up with the present. That casts them as the heroes of that story rather than as the villains of that story. He suggests that we identify narratives such as the Blitz spirit, with everyone pulling together in the face of adversity. This is where community really works: we're stronger together than we are apart. That sort of narrative, which has been extremely effective in the past - in the second world war, within the trades union movement and the non-conformist movements and many others - is the sort of story that people are going to respond to. It's only a small and rarefied group of people who will respond to unrooted information that just tells us that we're all doomed unless we change our behaviour.

**Helen** But today, when individualism has been championed and a lot of the social glue has dissipated, do you think the narrative Marshall is suggesting would still work?

**George** What we're looking for is a story that can be told. This might not be the ideal story but it's hard to find another which doesn't conflict with what we know and yet does have the potential to inspire and motivate people. Right now people are craving some community again. We've seen some of the devastating effects of individualism and of a culture where 'greed is good': we've seen a public demand for public finances and services to be protected for everybody's benefit, and there's great tiredness with the idea that public services are a waste of money. This is a very good moment to start trying to re-assert community values and their benefits.

**Mike** Obama's election has rekindled a lot of people's hope in that sense. There's some danger in that hope, but also there's some real, practical things that he's done in recasting what would have been considered environmentalist initiatives as social issues that make economic sense. He made a good argument about how it's not the size of government, but how it functions. Calling for greater US fuel efficiency, and granting California its waiver, are huge issues. We can all shame each other, or feel better about our 'green' behaviour, but it's these real broad-based social movement initiatives that make the big differences.

**George** His inauguration speech was a very good example of the sort of narrative that

George Marshall discusses. He told a story of America pulling together in the face of adversity: 'I can't do this for you. We've all got to do this together'.

*In Britain I see the discourse of 'pulling together' around the environment at work sometimes in The Guardian, The Times, the Sun and the Independent, but in the Mail and the Express, there's still a constant anxiety about how much environmentalism is perceived to 'cost'.*

**George** Although it's not distinct. In the Sun, for example, one day you'll have a story about how much environmentalism costs and the next day you'll have a story about how we've all got to get off our arses and save the planet, and then the next day you'll have a story about what a load of beardy-weirdies all the environmentalists are. So we can't find consistency there -- though, unquestionably, the Sun is way ahead of the Mail and the Express in its awareness of what the issues are.

**Mike** The Mail and other tabloid readers have been fed a steady diet of misinformation about how emissions trading and taxation issues will influence their lives. It's been framed in particular economic ways which feed into their resistances and actually go against their own interests. They've contributed to people overlooking the costs of negligence and the costs that that's going to have on peoples' lives.

**Max** The TV programme The Great Global Warming Swindle was similarly destructive. In fact, in my work on US TV coverage of climate change I found it hadn't kept pace with a lot of the top US newspapers over that same period. And when James Painter at BBC World Service examined coverage of the IPCC first assessment report, he found it wasn't covered very much in major television media markets worldwide. But television remains very influential. I'm starting a project in Mumbai, where so many city level officials say that in the slums everybody's hooked up to a television: this is how they're getting their information. TV content is one of the blind spots within research on the discourse around climate change.

**George** TV does have a particular problem in explaining any scientific issue. How do you show ocean acidification on camera? It's not easy. You're dealing with concepts which don't necessarily have an anchor in visual images, and that's what television journalists hate more than anything else, so they avoid it. But some channels have been quite brave in trying to bridge that gap and certain journalists - like Roger Harrabin - have done their best to give it a proper hearing. The BBC's Climate Wars was excellent – rigorous, persuasive, stuck to the science. But it is a hard thing to cover. Whenever I see a news report on climate change I end up groaning, because they either get it wildly wrong, or they do the subject so little justice they might as well not have broadcast it.

What aspect of media coverage of climate change would you most like to see changed?

**Mike** Getting away from the focus on consumption. Buying a green light bulb, or hybrid car: it seems like we can't get out of that mindset. Although, on the other hand, this does allow people to engage with this global issue on a day-to-day basis, and these purchases often turn into money for charities and environmental groups that then go out and do the lobbying. But we seem to be getting stuck in the mindset that responsibility is always at the level of the consumer. And that is part of it, but the question is: how do we get out of that area and broaden it up?

**George** I completely agree. You see endless examples of eco-consumerism being promoted and all it's succeeded in doing is creating a whole new class of junk with the word 'eco' attached. Whether it is possible to do anything about this. I'm not sure, because what the newspapers aimed at the affluent middle classes do is to try to fit environmentalism in with their concerns. I was interviewed by The Telegraph magazine recently and they said, right, give us ten things readers can buy to make them greener. I said, no, that's not how it works. If they want to be greener, I can give you ten things they *shouldn't* buy. And they said, no, we need ten things they can buy, that's what it's about. And it's not as if eco-junk is replacing ordinary junk. Advertisers have created a new need: to have a whole load of eco-junk on top of ordinary junk. It's profoundly tokenistic environmentalism.

**Mike** These individualised ways of interfacing with media bring us to larger political economic questions of how these media organisations are funded. Who owns them? How are they structured? It highlights some of the real problems associated with the consolidation and corporate control of mass media. We've got these egregious contradictions of advertising short-hop getaways next to features on 'becoming greener'.

**George** I once wrote a column about Shell and BP greenwash and in the on-line version, right next to it, was a greenwash advertisement placed by BP. Although I surprise myself by saying this, as far as the media in Britain is concerned, I'm not sure that there's a direct correlation between the size and power of the media conglomerates, and the extent to which they put out an environmental message. Thanks to James Murdoch, News International is now doing some pretty good stuff, whereas the much smaller Barclay Brothers concern is diabolical as far as the environment's concerned. Similarly the Daily Mail and General Trust - again a much smaller company than News International - is far worse in terms of its coverage, and even worse than that is Richard Desmond's comparatively small empire and the Express. It's more to do with the bias of the proprietor than the size or reach of the corporation. But overall we still see a bias towards consumerist, short-term, ill thought-out responses, rather than calls for massive, frontloaded, immediate CO<sub>2</sub> percentage cuts. We're just not seeing that being relayed through the media at all. Another very clear example is that we have tremendous media discussion of electricity generation as something you can produce by many different means, but very little media discussion about heat. And, as far as households are concerned, our energy consumption in the form of heat is much greater than that in the form of electricity, and yet it's discussed as a security, but not an environmental, issue.

*Is the lack of coverage of those issues primarily because they're difficult for journalists to explore or primarily because think-tanks and NGOs aren't discussing or 'packaging' them well enough for journalists?*

**Helen** When we worked on the Energy Bill and helped push for the feed-in tariff to be introduced, that got good coverage; we were framing it as good for families, local businesses and so forth - because it is. If you get that link in the chain sorted, it opens the door to much bigger change. If micro-generation really takes off, for example, you'll get loads of people employed in the renewable industry, like in Germany.

**George** And it'll be almost completely useless in terms of actually dealing with the problem.

Germany's got half a million solar roofs and they produce 0.04% of its electricity. It's a total dead end and I'm very concerned about the emphasis that micro-generation has had from NGOs as well as from the media. I think it's been wildly misconceived and I'm very glad to see that Greenpeace has quietly dropped its micro-generation and distributed energy campaign.

**Helen** It's a small part of our work on energy but we do lobby on it. But there isn't the kind of coverage we need for the massive structural change that needs to take place. We need to upgrade the energy grid: that's getting scant coverage at the moment.

**George** Yes, that's a very good example. The key environmental technology as far as I'm concerned is the high voltage direct current line but you don't often hear about that. It means you can transport electricity over tremendous distances with very low losses and that means that you can tap into the most abundant sources of ambient energy where ever they are, however far away from population centres - which is exactly the opposite of micro-generation, where you say, right, I happen to live in the centre of London so I'm going to generate my electricity here, even though average wind speeds are below four metres per second and it's a total waste of time. It opens out tremendous potential for accessing renewable generation that's way out to sea, or in the Sahara, or making use of geo-thermal energy in Italy and Iceland. The potential that high voltage DC opens up is far, far greater than that opened up by any single generating technology. But generation is considered sexy and transmission is not, and so all the emphasis has been on generation.

So does that mean in effect that the majority of mass media, NGOs and lobby groups are still caught up in an individualistic ethos?

**George** This is why they love micro-generation. The Tory party's a classic example of this. They wildly over-emphasise the potential of micro-generation because (a) their members hate wind farms and, (b) it's something you can do for yourself. It reflects the whole individualised, atomised approach to dealing with problems, and I strongly criticise Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace for playing into that agenda and allowing people to make wildly inflated claims for a bunch of technologies which, at this latitude, are by and large completely useless, whilst distracting attention from the technologies which ought to be applied.

*There's a real issue though, isn't there, here, between thrashing out what's pandering to corporate individualism and what's an empowering form of 'grassroots change'? How do you separate those things out?*

**Helen** I'm not sure. I still think that part of the problem with climate change is that people know it's a big bad problem but they don't see anything happening in their communities. And they don't see the government saying, okay now: we're going to do this. And so, things like micro-generation - whatever your point of view on the contribution they can make in practical terms - do have the benefit of empowering people to make and see real change in their communities.

**George** They're seeing false change. They're seeing an appearance of change in their communities which actually isn't changing anything. It creates the impression that the

problem has been dealt with, when it has not been dealt with in any way at all.

**Max** I agree. Returning to the recycling example, it so often involves thinking of how to stimulate the economy to recycle parts, to create faux wind turbines to put on people's rooftops so that people feel like they're doing something. Meanwhile, environmentally unfriendly business activities then continue.

**George** Tokenistic measures supplant the real measures. I don't know how many people I've come across who, when you say to them, sorry, you're an environmentalist and you're flying to Australia?, they say, well you know, I've earned this. I've been cycling to work for the past year. You think, great, well that'll account for the flight between Heathrow and Kent. What about the rest of it?

**Mike** Yes, that's the wider cultural politics of the offset mentality, isn't it? I'm doing this but I'm rewarding myself.

**George** There is this peculiar problem with climate change that the effective answers lie with big business and big government, which are also where the problems lie. We actually can't solve this by ourselves in any way. We can't even begin to touch it by ourselves, and the consumerist response is completely hopeless, whether it's in terms of changing the things we buy, changing the amount we recycle or trying to generate our own electricity. It's in no way matched to the scale of the problem, so we can only be effective as citizens rather than as consumers, and that means coming back to the discussion that the only effective journalism is the journalism which mobilises us as citizens rather than as consumers, to put pressure on those sources of power which can be effectively mobilised.

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