

CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE NEWSROOM:
JOURNALISTS' EVOLVING STANDARDS OF OBJECTIVITY
WHEN COVERING GLOBAL WARMING

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ABSTRACT

Climate change may well be the most important environmental issue of our time. For journalists covering the environmental beat, there is no bigger story – and none more treacherous. Journalists have been accused of distorting the scientific consensus by applying “false balance” to those who say anthropogenic climate change is happening and those who say it isn’t. This study interviewed 11 experienced environmental reporters for mainstream print or online publications about how they understand the occupational norm of objectivity as applied to coverage of climate change, and how has that changed since 2000. Results were that subjects expressed support for several of nine dimensions of objectivity considered, but they redefined these terms to fit with their experiences. In the case of “balance,” reporters have redefined it to mean applying a “weight of evidence” approach (Dunwoody, 2005) to science stories, and they tend to use global warming “skeptics” as sources very sparingly. There only limited support for increased transparency in journalism, especially if that included revealing the reporter’s personal opinions. Eight of 11 reporters interviewed said journalists should still be objective when covering climate change – but they indicated this meant “writing with authority,” or interpreting their research. The other three journalists rejected the notion of objectivity as being impossible or prone to abuse. This study’s findings indicate that the core values of journalism are incredibly durable, especially among its senior practitioners.