

One of the surest ways to trick the public into thinking climate change isn't anything worth worrying about is to convince a trusted media outlet into broadcasting doubt. Hardly any doubt exists among scientists studying climate change that humans are driving it, to be clear — scientists confirmed the human factor in 1979 — but for years reporters have unwittingly distorted that fact by adhering to the journalistic norm of balance.

For example, on Oct. 7, 2018, in *The Wall Street Journal*: "While a large body of scientific work concludes emissions cause global warming, some dispute those conclusions."

"Some" represents fewer than 3 percent of publishing climate scientists, but a quarter of the words in that sentence are dedicated to doubt. (According to a 2016 paper, 97 percent of publishing climate scientists agree humans are responsible.)

There was a raft of false-balance coverage on climate change between 1990 and 2005 in four major U.S. newspapers, studies found. More than half of the articles sampled in one study gave as much voice to deniers, doubters and the uninformed as they did to the scientific consensus on climate change, and only six percent exclusively covered the dominant human role. The researchers coined the practice "balance as bias."

The raft has since sunk, though. A 2014 study found the preponderance of scientific evidence guided 11 veteran environmental journalists' coverage on climate change, not an instinct to seek all sides. And an effort made for this story to find examples of sources in mainstream, nonpartisan news stories spreading doubt between 2006 and 2019 netted fewer than two dozen instances.

Environmental reporters interviewed for this story said false balance in reporting is largely dead — although, still, they said, it lingers in policy and business stories that quote

conservative officials. None of the nine reporters frame climate change as a controversy anymore, and some, particularly those who came to journalism from other fields, never did. Many of them said evidence of climate change is now so obvious to much of the public that they spend less time spotlighting impacts and more time, because the country is reckoning with what to do, spotlighting possible solutions.

So what happened?

"It's about the science," and the arguments made by people who reject human-caused climate change aren't convincing, said Neela Banerjee, a reporter for InsideClimate News.

"Nobody's asking them to clear a bar that other climate scientists don't clear. They just have to clear it."

Banerjee, like many reporters, "much to our shame," used to cover climate change with a false balance. It wasn't her beat anyway. "I wouldn't say I was a climate denier," she said, "but it was like, climate change isn't really, you know — I'm covering this other stuff," which, between 1999 and 2008, was Russian business, energy, Baghdad and religion for the New York Times. But in 2010 she took a job covering energy and the environment for The L.A. Times and her editor, she remembers, told her, "Climate change is real. That's how we're going to cover it."

Banerjee's evolution is similar to other veteran environmental reporters: once they reach a certain level of expertise, they're more likely to ignore false balance. In the 2014 study that interviewed veteran environmental journalists, researchers found they were unlikely to become victims of the balance-as-bias trap, more likely to follow the preponderance of evidence and often relied on their own scientific expertise in evaluating sources. They took, in short, a weight-of-evidence approach. Peer-reviewed research is often a primary source of information

on climate change for the reporters interviewed for this story. To develop expertise further, some reporters seek a structured education. Laura Paskus, a freelancer in New Mexico, enrolled in a master's program in geology at the University of New Mexico. She's doing her thesis on the Rio Grande, which she's written about as a reporter.

Reporters who come to journalism from other backgrounds are more likely to consider the weight of evidence when reporting on climate change because they were less conditioned to give equal voice to all sides of an issue. Staci Matlock, editor of The Taos News in northern New Mexico and a former Santa Fe New Mexican reporter, said she was among the last reporters in her region to switch from false balance. Why? Because she was trained to present all sides. "We're way past that now," she said. Paskus, though, was an archaeologist before becoming a journalist. She made the decision when she started covering climate change in the early to mid 2000s that she wasn't going to give voice to sources who ignored the scientific consensus. Unlike her colleagues, who at times criticized her, she was not steeped in objectivity. "I just think when it comes to science or helping the public make better decisions for the future," she said, "the truths are pretty clear cut, in my mind."

But reporters are still susceptible to the balance-as-bias trap when writing stories centering on things other than the science of climate change, like policy or business stories that overlap the subject. Especially today with a White House administration that often rejects climate science, politics can cover for doubt. This is how doubters make mainstream news nowadays: they're in power, Banerjee said. Rebecca Moss covers the environment for The Santa Fe New Mexican and often writes about state policy, and when public officials make statements on climate change that don't square with the scientific consensus, sometimes, she said, she has to

cover "both sides." "You just can't ignore their voice," particularly when it's shaping policy, she said. "That's a really interesting aspect of public transparency."

Craig Welch, a senior National Geographic reporter, said what Moss is describing is different than false balance and is unavoidable. He doesn't write much about policy at Nat Geo, but if he were to cover, say, the Trump administration's decision to withdraw the U.S. from the international agreement to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, known as the Paris climate accord, he would counterbalance misinformation with accurate context on climate change. But fact checking can be challenging when a reporter's deadline is looming and their resources are limited. Moss said she tries to fact check, but The New Mexican is a small daily. Sometimes, she said, she doesn't have time and the doubt goes unchallenged.

But reporters draw a fine line between policy and science or environment stories. Many of them interviewed for this story said they would do as Moss does and include doubting sources in politics stories when those sources drive policy, but they have no place in climate-science stories. They don't have the necessary expertise, Banerjee said. InsideClimate News has interviewed officials from The Heartland Institute, perhaps the country's most vehement, free-market denier of human-caused climate change; Myron Ebell, director of another free-market, climate-science-denying think tank called the Competitive Enterprise Institute; and others like them because the leader of the free world, Donald Trump, embraces their views.

Now that journalists have largely moved beyond false balance and the public and many policy makers are on board, too, they are working to evolve their coverage of climate change. Welch, the Nat Geo reporter, said he has spent much of his career identifying the impacts of climate change but feels it's time for more solutions journalism. The problem and its impacts are

clear to most people, he said. "The question now is, 'What are we going to do and what is that going to look like?'" Staci Matlock, editor of The Taos News in northern New Mexico, is trying to shift the paper's coverage to highlight community resilience. She sees it as a public service. "Can we think about just pitching ideas for the direction maybe our community can head, so that if the worst portion of climate change comes to us, we're already ready to survive as best we can? I don't know," she said. "Maybe that's pie in the sky."

Outside factors also determine how a reporter frames climate change. Reporters consider how the information will land with their audience. Paskus, who covers all of New Mexico, a purple state, has to report on climate change in a way that will connect with both democrats as well as republicans, who are more likely to balk. That might involve writing about the crisis without using the words "climate change." Readers of The Taos News, though, are generally more liberal. Cody Hooks, an environment reporter there, said he doesn't have to take the same precautions as Paskus. But independent of ideology, convincing an audience conditioned to a land of extremes that what they're living through isn't more of the same can be a challenge, he said. Drought is common in the Southwest. So are wildfires. Often to land a point, Matlock said, it's best to talk not about the current impacts but the future ones, like that New Mexico is projected to lose most of its forests by 2050.

Political shifts in government also influence how reporters frame climate change. New Mexico's current governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham, is a democrat. "Covering climate change for eight years under the (Susana) Martinez administration" — which was republican and had a bad record on the environment — "there was no shortage of what we weren't doing as a state," Paskus said. But now the state is taking action, people are talking about the problem and she's

considering what to cover next. Nationally, the opposite is true. While the Obama administration accepted the science and took steps to address climate change, the Trump administration largely has not. The administration's inaction and obstruction has netted a slew of watchdog stories on climate change.

Climate change is far more than just a science story today, the reporters said. Amy Martin, founder and executive producer of the podcast Threshold, is nearly allergic to stories that cover climate change exclusively as a science issue. Climate change is a moral issue, an equality issue, a security issue, an innovation issue, a social-justice issue, a what-our-vision-is-as-a-nation-and-as-a-species issue, she said. And it's not a controversy. "Treat the realities of climate change just like you would treat any other important issue," she said. "The whole point of the denial movement, if you can call it that, is to make us think and rethink and question and stumble on ourselves."

While most journalists have moved beyond false balance, there still remain pitfalls. Reporters in conservative areas may be less likely to explicitly connect the impacts of climate change to the crisis itself, fearful of upsetting their audience. And reporters covering conservative policy makers may be more likely to broadcast doubt because they can't ignore their statements, even if science doesn't support their substance. But moving beyond false balance has allowed journalists more bandwidth to cover climate change in different ways. They can move beyond controversy -- and many are moving beyond impacts -- to solutions.