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Not what Ben meant . . .

Posted on September 6th, 2011 by earlelland

There are two ways of covering science news:

The first is the equivalent to covering a fire or other disaster – get as much information as possible and throw it out at the public as quick as possible. That emphasizes the true nature of news – that it is immediate – and that its lifespan is short.

The second method involves caution and more patience than most journalists can spare. It also involves gathering as much information as possible but then adds a layer of questioning asking if that info tells a complete enough story for the audience, or does it contain gaping holes making the story incomplete.

We see this tug-of-war occurring most often in science stories involving public policy and perhaps in no area more often than in coverage of the global climate change issue. And a case last week provides a perfect example.



Early last month, researchers from the University of Huntsville published a [paper](#) in the journal *Remote Sensing* that basically argued that current climate models had underestimated the ability of the upper atmosphere to release temperature into space. The researchers argued that satellite data disagreed with climate models arguing the rate of global atmospheric warming was increasing.

News outlets that tended to oppose the idea of human-caused warming quickly grabbed the research and touted it as evidence that current climate change warnings were wrong. Fox News, Forbes magazine, the Drudge Report and many others touted the story for all it was worth, even though the satellite data only covered the two-year period of 2000-2001.

Then last week, the journal's editor [publicly announced](#) that he was resigning because the paper had been published. Falling on his sword, the editor, Wolfgang Wagner — noted climatologist in his own right — said that his journal's peer review process had failed in this case and the paper should never have been approved since other research had earlier disproved the claims that the paper's authors had made. He also chided the mass media for reporting that this single paper was evidence of the falsehood of climate change.

The resignation itself then became major news since the editor had other options available other than resignation. He could have waited and let the

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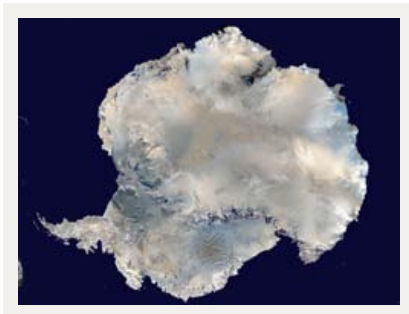
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scientific community respond with follow-up papers disputing the arguments. He could have even retracted the paper. Instead, he argued that as editor, he was responsible for the flawed peer review and elected to step down.

This was misplaced nobility, suicide by ethics, and no real gain resulted.

The climate change skeptic community has jumped on individual papers like this before. In 2007, [we reported on a study](#) by Ohio State researcher David Bromwich that said both temperatures and precipitation over Antarctica didn't rise as much as several current climate models had suggested.

The climate change skeptic community quickly embraced that report, alleging that it was a smoking gun showing that concern over climate change was a hoax. Before it died down, more than 140,000 people had looked at our report.



But what that community failed to do was acknowledge important parts of the report — that Bromwich had said that the disagreement between climate model predictions and the snowfall and temperature records doesn't necessarily mean that the models are wrong.

"It isn't surprising that these models are not doing as well in these remote parts of the world. These are global models and shouldn't be expected to be equally exact for all locations," he said.

"It's very hard in these polar latitudes to demonstrate a global warming signal. This is in marked contrast to the northern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula that is one of the most rapidly warming parts of the Earth."

These caveats by Bromwich placed his work in proper perspective, but they were lost on the masses.

Once upon a time, the public could have a reasonable confidence in the reporting it received. The world of journalism had its own checks and balances to insure that most news could be trusted to be at the least, the best information available at the time.

And science reporting, usually far removed from any political issues, seemed even more reliable than the rest.

Those days appear long gone now with the massive loss in science journalists during the last decade, and the frantic intensification of interest among the public in news – any news! – as soon as possible.

Ben Bradlee, the former editor of the Washington Post, had an explanation for the mistakes that journalists occasionally made along the way. He simply defined news as "history caught on the run."

But what we have now is not what he meant. *—Earle Holland*

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[Fargo Coupons](#) // Oct 5, 2011 at 3:15 pm

I agree that many times the news wants to quickly throw something out there without really getting the whole story. When they do make a mistake then all they do is make a small retraction on the last page on the smallest column.

[Clarion CX 501](#) // Nov 21, 2011 at 6:08 pm

History caught on the run eh? More like big business caught you by the pen and slapped you. Lobby groups own the mainstream news, nuff said. Good article thanks.

[Diego Castellano](#) // Dec 21, 2011 at 2:03 pm

I don't believe he failed at all. There is not much said about the Real Climate change. We are really just starting to notice somethings different and yet we as people can't say anything about it becaues it is new. Then again, what we don't know about Our Earth we will in time. I say state your idea's anyway. At least its out there and let the people say what they will, they do anyway!

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