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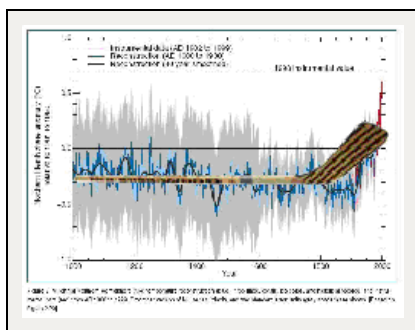
Weathercasters' lament . . .

Posted on January 12th, 2009 by earlelland

Like a song that gets stuck in your head and won't go away, sometimes I read a story that just bothers me relentlessly. That was the case when I saw a [Cleveland Plain Dealer](#) story early last month.

The PD story focused on the fact that a preponderance of television weather forecasters seem to think that concerns over global climate change are, at best, overblown, and at worst, a grand conspiracy by doomsayers. You can find the story [here](#).

While the story actually focuses on Cleveland-area forecasters, the same disbelief seems to permeate among their peers around the country. And judging by the feedback the PD got from readers of the story – a printout of the web version of the story and the comments



it elicited ran more than 40 pages – there's a sizeable chunk of the public content to abide by the weathercasters' disbelief.

Key to this quandary is the contradiction that comes with those TV gurus' credentials. Many weathercasters, with their stations' support, tout their accreditation by the [American Meteorological Society](#) as evidence of their scientific knowledge of the field.

But the AMS is soundly on record supporting the evidence that global climate is changing – mostly warming – and that human activity is largely to blame. That is the position taken by the United Nation's 1,200-member [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), as well as other august bodies such as the [National Academy of Sciences](#).

It would be easy enough to just ignore this conflict and chalk it up to being another indication of the shallowness of television. But that would be dangerous.

A [report](#) at the end of last summer by the respected [Pew Research Center for the People & the Press](#) showed that 52 percent of those surveyed watched local television news regularly, and 48 percent saying that they watched weather news "very closely." In fact, of the 18 "types of news" the Pew study asked about, weather was at the top of the list!

Too many people still believe that global climate change is a relatively balanced, intellectual tug-of-war among scientists whereas, in reality, the actual proportion of credible researchers who doubt the IPCC's conclusions

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is minuscule.

Puzzled by this, I asked two colleagues for an explanation:

Bud Ward is one of the most respected environmental reporters around and was just named [Climate Change Communicator of the Year](#) by [George Mason University's Center for Climate Change Communications](#). Ward edits the [Yale Forum on Climate Change & The Media](#) and also commented on the Plain Dealer story.

He pointed to the presence and influence of the forecasting giant [Accuweather](#), a service out of State College, PA, as having some influence. He also suggested that in some cases, professional pride and jealousy can pit weathercasters against climate scientists, with the latter having strong academic credentials but the former enjoying popular appeal.



Bret Atkins, former reporter and weathercaster at WCMH-TV in Columbus, suggested that, "In TV, it doesn't always take facts to make a story or an opinion."

He questioned how many – if any – TV weathercasters actually wrote a well-thought-out piece for a magazine on the topic – "something that has to undergo some review or scrutiny?"

"Until they take the time and risk of professional wrist-slapping from the academic or interested community by researching and writing something that appears in the arena for debate, they're much like the opinion from a drunk on a barstool – pull his string and he talks."

Harsh words but bearing some truth.

Personally, I fear the answer is much simpler: Understanding science can be hard, and climate science with its seemingly limitless variables is extremely difficult even for experts. The public likes things simpler, less complex.

It's just easier to simply say that the experts are wrong and trust the smiling weatherman instead. *—Earle Holland*

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[Michael Payday](#) // Jan 13, 2009 at 1:37 pm

While carbon dioxide is mostly human related, isn't methane gas something like 20 times worse as a greenhouse gas? Do humans account for most of the methane emissions as well? I think something else that could be going on is the weakening of the ozone layer and earth's electro magnetic field. This is allowing more of the solar radiation into earth, also warming the temperature.

[earleholland](#) // Jan 13, 2009 at 1:49 pm

Yes, methane is more problematic than carbon dioxide (pound-for-pound). And researchers do worry that warming in the polar areas will thaw tundra and release large amounts of methane as a result. There are also known cycles of solar output that can affect the planet, but none of this matches the impact humans have made that has led to warming, __EH

[j.hart](#) // Jan 14, 2009 at 9:29 am

I think it's important to consider the possibility that weather reporters see, on a day to day basis, the limitations in our forecasting abilities. If we cannot reliably predict what is going to happen locally within a 5-day forecast, how can we claim to know what global conditions might be in 2100?

Also, I find it a little shocking to see the hockey stick graph still touted today, as if the computer model that's based on has held up well to criticism. For any kind of input from the "minuscule" population of climate change heretics, a good start would be searching senate.gov for Senator Inhofe's hearings on global warming, dating back to 2006...

[Paula May](#) // Jan 14, 2009 at 9:46 am

Thank goodness not everyone has drunk the purple koolaid when it comes to global warming...or as it is called now "climate change." Maybe the weathercasters aren't on board because they're not getting paid the big research bucks that are getting thrown at the issue. Maybe they, like many Americans, can see the irony in saying with any certainty what's going to happen 1-5-10-50-100-1000 years from now when they're lucky to get the next day's weather right. And contrary to your assertion, there are hundreds of respected scientists who do not believe the earth is warming, who do not believe that humans have much if any effect on the climate or the weather, and in fact, who say that we seem to be in a cooling phase. I would be much more worried about that. It's far easier for humans to adapt to warmer temperatures than it is to cold ones.

[Paula May](#) // Jan 14, 2009 at 9:48 am

Also, FYI, the clock seems to be off by an hour on this website, as indicated by the time that comments are posted.

[earleholland](#) // Jan 14, 2009 at 10:30 am

To Paula: Suggesting that researchers are proponents of climate change because they rake in “big research bucks” for their personal gain shows a surprising lack of understanding of how research is done at a university. Investigators personally get no more money for having five research grants than they would from having two, for example, so there’s no vested interest in chasing your alleged “big bucks.” Besides, the amount of funding available for climate change research is far less than that available for many other disciplines.

Also, the “hundreds of respected scientists” you allege discount climate change aren’t the ones doing the research and getting published after undergoing peer review. You said it yourself: They “believe” the climate isn’t warming. That’s a lot easier than actually doing the work and finding the evidence. And in fact, it is equally challenging for humans to adapt to heat or cold.

Lastly, the delay in posting isn’t a clock problem — this is a moderated blog and sometimes it takes us a while to authorize the comments. But thanks for the feedback anyway.__EH

Eric Toman // Jan 14, 2009 at 10:44 am

I think the disconnect between meteorologists and climate scientists has more to do with the timeframes in which they operate. Meteorologists typically work over short timescales (e.g., out to 14 days) while climate scientists look at much longer timescales. In the short term, there is always substantial variability, much of which is smoothed out over the longer term allowing for the identification of trends.

While this may seem somewhat trivial, it can have a real impact on how you view the world. For example, imagine the difference between a person watching a baseball game who makes predictions based on one night’s performance versus a statistician who bases his prediction across an entire season or career. If a batter has gone 0 for 2 in a particular game, the first analyst will not expect them to get a hit in their third at bat. However, if the batter has a .300 batting average over a season or career, the other analysts would recognize he has a good chance (but not a certainty) of getting a hit. So, while the batter may have extreme nights (e.g., going 0 for 5 Monday and 5 for 5 Tuesday), viewing his long-term average will provide the best prediction of his overall performance.

Similarly, related to climate there may be events that don’t seem to be in line with a warming climate; however, the balance of evidence suggest the climate is, in fact, warming and impacts are already occurring.

Chris_E // Jan 14, 2009 at 11:06 am

I understand and share concerns about human impact on the environment, however, when I see an article like this coming out of our university I really question the direction the debate is moving in.

Complaining about the TV weatherman’s bias, jealousy or lack of

understanding the issues surrounding global climate change is really a pointless exercise in wishing you could control what other people have to say.

The question researchnews ought to be concerned with foremost is "are we outputting good science". The clean up your own house first rule applies. There are plenty of disturbing reports out there about researchers and grant seekers doing bad science of one kind or another. (To be clear, not specifically OSU.) Enough to make one take pause if not feel panic about the current state of research surrounding climate change.

Good, ethical data collection and reporting with proper controls, peer review and debate are what the world needs most from our scientific community, not backlash against TV weather anchors.

[Michael Payday](#) // Jan 14, 2009 at 2:12 pm

Earl-

As a professional statistician, I would like to know something that can easily put an end to this debate. If we have weather records for the last thousands of years, or at least have a good understanding of the climate in the long term, can we make it into some kind of predictive model?

Humans have not been here long in the scheme of things. If we can follow long term weather patterns, could we make an accurate model that would predict earth's climate? If so, how far off are we from the model? Is the difference statistically significant? There's an easy way to show the human impact if there really is one.

As fas as I know, the biggest changes in global climate have always come from mega disasters, such as massive meteors or comets, maybe a super volcano erupting. It would be interesting to see if human activity really is causing something. My guess is the temperature would heat up eventually just as more life came to be. The more living organisms there are, the more carbon dioxide we put out by breathing.

Any idea if such a model exists or if we can compare the predicted climate to the actual climate?

[Tina](#) // Feb 5, 2009 at 2:20 pm

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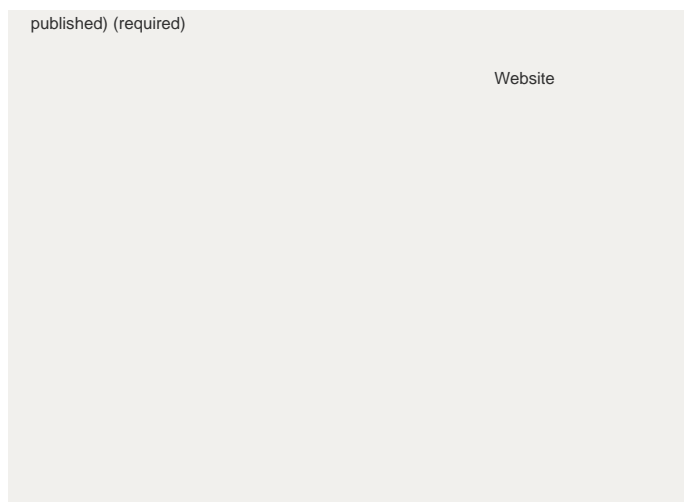
[Jiel](#) // May 29, 2009 at 8:20 am

Please enlarge it because i want to see it closely. Thanks!

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