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Global Warming: Simplistic Debates Mock the Problem

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### Global Warming: Simplistic Debates Mock the Problem

Almost everyone agrees that the Earth is warmer than it used to be, thirty to two hundred years ago, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Scientists, international companies, governments, and moviemakers are all concerned. Debates center on exactly what causes climate changes, how much of it is anthropogenic, what problems it may cause, and what can be done about it, especially on the short term without major disruption of both local and international social and economic systems. Such a complex issue has multiple causes, many with no solution in sight, and perhaps with no feasible solution. Debates range from the "yes, it is" / "no, it's not" level to who can stay in business with increasing environmental regulations, but the snide tones and mocking comments of journalists devalue the information before one can formulate a reasonable opinion.

Michael Coren (2006) gives a background of issues involved in global warming titled as a debate: "The science debate behind climate change: Forecasting the future remains a contentious exercise." The first subhead starts the debate: "Is global warming really a threat?" (Coren, 2006, n.p.) The article explains the difficulty of tracking and modeling the information for a long term, say over fifty years, but it also shows how some of the predictions of the late 1970s have been borne out, convincing governments and businesses to make efforts to clean up their acts, if only for the spin. A small minority of scientists suggest that all the data collected in the last fifty years only shows that a rise in temperature exists, which is probably within the normal range of climactic variations:

"Scientists make meaningless or ambiguous statements. Advocates and media translate statements into alarmist declarations. Politicians respond to alarm by feeding scientists more money," said Lindzen at a scientific conference this January. He added that the accepted evidence is "entirely consistent with there being virtually no problem at all." (Coren, 2006, par. 24.)

This example of the debate society is paired in Coren's article with another scientist, Richard Sommerville, who says, "[Lindzen] is taken seriously because he's capable of excellent science, [But] most of the scientific community thinks he's mistaken... People are given a fair hearing and then we move on." (Coren, 2006, par. 26 ) The tone of the article is expository, not persuasive, but the author includes these quotes in the appearance of "balanced" reporting, but as examples of infighting. This exchange is past the middle of the text, an unlikely spot to focus on debate. It makes both sides appear dismissive of each other, as if neither has any merit.

Another article, "Talks advance as planet continues to warm" presents the views of international governments as debate:

Against this backdrop of rising emissions and discord over what to do about them, delegates from more than 160 nations on May 26 wrapped up two weeks of semiannual U.N. sessions in Bonn, Germany, on how to confront the threat of climate change. (2006, par.3)

Despite this opening, the tone of the article is expository, giving facts on the evidence found of global warming and the projected success of only two Kyoto Protocol signers, Britain and Sweden in meeting their goals this year. ("Talks advance", 2006). The adversarial position of the United States is explained: "The White House objects that Kyoto-style mandates would badly crimp the U.S. economy, and complains that China, India and other poorer but fast-growing economies are not regulated by Kyoto." ("Talks advance", 2006, par. 22). The article continues that no further changes are expected until the end of the Bush administration, but according to Eliot Diringer, an analyst with Washington's private Pew Center on Global Climate Change, "It's important that people have a good understanding of the issues, ... so that when the political opportunity arises to actually negotiate a deal, they're in a position to do that." (cited in "Talks Advance," 2006, par. 25). While the language is neutral, the organization of the article implies

criticism of the Bush administration for disagreement with the Kyoto Protocol, implying that any US progress would have to wait for the next president.

Scott Malone's article, "ANALYSIS-Is Corporate America going green?" sets up debate both between environmental activists and companies, and among the companies on "going green." He juxtaposes the "slick" ads for Ford's new hybrid vehicle with the steps large companies are taking to make manufacturing plants more energy efficient while energy prices soar. Activists lobby for more regulations, and companies fight them. Malone concludes with paired quotes from portfolio manager Steve Malloy and GE VP Lorraine Bolsinger to stress the nature of the debate:

"Global warming activists are using these guys to get these laws passed. And once the laws are in effect, they are going to get more and more intrusive, and they're not going to be able to control them," said Steve Milloy, a portfolio manager. "Without some kind of legislation, we don't see that there's going to be significant progress made," Bolsinger said. "We're not afraid of whatever regulation will come." (2006, par 20-21)

The focus is on the quick quote rather than consideration of what the costs of regulation might be to manufacturing or on the analysis of the effectiveness of other kinds of environmental regulations from the recent past. Environmental activists are portrayed as antagonists.

Molly Ivins' opinion piece on global warming, subtitled " On the premise that spring is too beautiful for a depressing topic like Iraq, I thought I'd take up a fun subject -- global warming" offers insight on journalism's part in setting up the debate:

The shame for journalism is that it has always been so easy to expose those few "scientific" voices claiming there is nothing to global warming. When the money for "scientific research" on such a subject comes from oil companies, skepticism is required.

Instead, many "journalists" let the bullies on the right cow us with the "liberal media" nonsense and reported there was "a debate" over global warming. There was no debate.

The only question is how fast it's happening. And the answer that keeps coming up is "faster than we thought. And still faster." (2006, par. 9-10.)

Where does the responsibility lie for presentation of information? Ivins says the Rush Limbaugh loves his job because he never has to use the word "responsible." Her tone is humorous and ironic, which may make the article more palatable, but the whole approach is that the issue is laughable and impossible to resolve. She feels that her Unitarian sister, who is busy replacing light bulbs with more energy-efficient models, has the right idea.

Peter Dykstra's review of "The Day after Tomorrow" discusses the disaster movie genre on the eve of the debut, which provided the timing of several of these articles. His introduction continues the debate with this suggestion:

Increasingly embraced by scientists as a reality, not just a theory, climate change could well bring its own devastation. It could well turn out to be far too important to be left to climate scientists. So let's have Hollywood take a crack at it, shall we? (2006, par 3-4.)

He concludes the article with a list of several other disaster and science fiction films, including *Waterworld*. This material includes a prediction that glaciers would approach Montreal by the 1990s, followed by another prediction that Montreal would become a tropical resort. He concludes with a retort that manages both to make light of the science and to flash a warning:

Is there a moral to this story? Perhaps not. But a vast majority of climate scientists say we're facing serious problems as the Earth warms. Emmerich and Costner say they're right. Crichton and Ginger Spice say they're wrong. It might not be a good idea to wait for the movie to find out for sure." (Dykstra, 2006, par.21.)

Dykstra also includes the "other side" as a mention a petition protesting the validity of global warming data that is still available on the web at

<http://www.oism.org/oism/s32p31.htm>. This site, operated by the Cooler Heads

Coalition, offers many diagrams of scientific information with an impressive list of

references that insists that global warming is a natural phenomenon and the increase of CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere is benevolent:

Human activities are believed to be responsible for the rise in CO<sub>2</sub> level of the atmosphere. Mankind is moving the carbon in coal, oil, and natural gas from below ground to the atmosphere and surface, where it is available for conversion into living things. We are living in an increasingly lush environment of plants and animals as a result of the CO<sub>2</sub> increase. Our children will enjoy an Earth with far more plant and animal life as that with which we now are blessed. This is a wonderful and unexpected gift from the Industrial Revolution. (Robinson, et. al. 2001, "Discussion" par. 5 )

Dykstra dismisses this organization, and it's petition as the work of "a father and son team who used to sell nuclear disaster survival kits," but the Oregon Institute of Science is not the only nay-sayer. The Coalition for Cooler Heads has articles about global warming that cast aspersions on the Pew Center, which is part of the recent Kyoto Protocol:

There are those who are advocating an a la carte approach after 2012....This approach to Kyoto round two gets around the problem that no one is doing much to meet their commitments, besides creating a lot of offices and programs and institutes. It sounds rather a poor thing right now, but no doubt the clever people at places like the Pew Center on Climate Change (which I must remind everyone is an industry-front group funded by the Pew family's fortune derived from owning the Sun Oil Company) can work it up into something most impressive. It's too bad that Enron is no longer the leading business member of the Pew Center because conjuring grand appearances out of thin (or perhaps I should say hot) air was Enron's specialty. (Ebell, 2003, par. 3)

The Cooler Heads Coalition also includes news updates from the Competitive Enterprise Institute (<http://www.cei.org>), an activist organization and think tank whose slogan is "Advancing Liberty from the Economy to Ecology." They oppose governmental regulations on environmental issues, and promote the view that the recent changes in climate are within normal variations.

Mark Twain said that while everyone talks about the weather, no one does anything about it. Considering the dire predictions over several decades of approaching disaster, the devastating hurricanes of last year, and the very complex interaction of all the factors involved in climate changes, any simple answer is "neat, plausible, and wrong." The constant posturing of debate simplifies issues, making them more difficult to resolve, but the ironic and cynical tone that is often used makes resolution seem impossible. On reading the various debates and the spin that seems to accompany each facet, this reader feels that we need a little less talk and a lot more action. Perhaps this problem is too large to cope with. Mother Earth will have to sort it out. It makes one wonder what the dinosaurs did to make her angry last time.

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