

Are Microbiologists Climate-Denying Science Haters?



By Alex Berezow — May 4, 2017



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Recently, I gave a seminar on "fake news" to professors and grad students at a large public university. Early in my talk, I polled the audience: "How many of you believe climate change is the world's #1 threat?"

Silence. Not a single person raised his or her hand.

Was I speaking in front of a group of science deniers? The College Republicans? Some fringe libertarian club? No, it was a room full of microbiologists.

How could so many incredibly intelligent people overwhelmingly reject what THE SCIENCE says about climate change? Well, they don't. They just don't see it as big of a threat to the world as other things. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of them felt that antibiotic resistance and pandemic disease were the biggest global threats. One person thought geopolitical instability was the biggest concern.

I told them that I believed [poverty was the world's biggest threat](#) [2]. The reason is poverty is the underlying condition that causes so much misery in the world. Consider that [1.3 billion people don't have electricity](#) [3]. And then consider how the lack of that basic necessity -- what the rest of us take completely for granted -- hinders their ability to develop economically and to succeed, let alone to have access to adequate healthcare. If we fix poverty, [we could stop easily preventable health problems](#) [4], such as infectious disease and malnutrition.

Was I booted out of the room? No, the audience understood why I believed what I did. But woe unto you who try to have a similar conversation with climate warriors.

Woe Unto You, Bret Stephens

Conservative columnist Bret Stephens, formerly of the *Wall Street Journal*, landed a new gig at the *New York Times*. His very first column, "[Climate of Complete Certainty](#) ^[5]," caused much weeping and gnashing of teeth. And probably the rending of garments. What did he say that caused so much outrage?

In a nutshell, his thesis was that certainty often backfires. He used the Hillary Clinton campaign as an example; in his view, certainty of victory was one factor in her defeat. Next, Mr. Stephens drew an analogy with climate science, worrying that the certainty expressed by the most vocal proponents of major climate policy reforms are speaking with a sense of certainty that is not well-founded. He warned against taking imperfect models too seriously and the dangers of hyperbolic doom-mongering.

It often irks me when political commentators write about science, usually because they haven't the foggiest clue what they're talking about. But Mr. Stephens' article used reasonable and cautious language, and to my knowledge, he didn't write anything that was factually incorrect. He simply concluded, as I myself have, that doomsday prophesying is wrong -- and even if it was right, it convinces few people, anyway. (Do the antics of the Westboro Baptist Church change anyone's mind?)

Yet, the reaction was swift and entirely predictable. [Vox](#) ^[6], whose stated mission is to "explain the news," called Mr. Stephens a "bullshitter." [GQ](#) ^[7] ran the headline, "Bret Stephens Is Why Liberals Have Every Right to Be Dicks." And [Wikipedia](#) ^[8] (whose founder is going to try to solve the problem of fake news) labeled him a "contrarian."

All that because Mr. Stephens warned against speaking hyperbolically. The concept of irony appears to be lost on his critics.

Can Smart People Disagree About the Threat of Climate Change?

What so many in the media (and apparently the climate science community) fail to understand is that people have different values and priorities. Foreign policy analysts are terrified of North Korea. Economists fear Brexit and a Eurozone collapse. Geologists, especially those in the Pacific Northwest, fear a huge earthquake. Experts across the spectrum perceive threats differently, usually magnifying those with which they are most familiar.

That means smart people can accept a common core of facts (such as the reality of anthropogenic global warming) without agreeing on a policy response.

Yet instead of being a place to debate a policy response for complex science issues, the media have chosen to be an extension of the militant Twitterverse. Even if you are just discussing courses of action, you are not allowed to deviate from climate orthodoxy lest you be labeled a science-denying heretic.

Perhaps journalists should spend more time talking to microbiologists.

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[1] <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/female-science-researchers-protective-uniform-equipment-290162750>

[2]

http://www.realclearscience.com/articles/2013/07/08/climate_change_isnt_worlds_biggest_problem_106585.html

[3] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/world-without-power/>

[4] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2017/02/13/save-world-cha-zuckerberg-should-spend-money-boring-stuff-10859>

[5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/opinion/climate-of-complete-certainty.html?source=acsh.org>

[6] <https://www.vox.com/2017/5/1/15482698/new-york-times-bret-stephens>

[7] <http://www.gq.com/story/bret-stephens-new-york-times-op-ed-op-ed>

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bret_Stephens