The Media Are Complacent
While the World Burns

*But there’s a brand-new playbook for journalists fighting for a 1.5°C world.*

*By Mark Hertsgaard and Kyle Pope*

_April 22, 2019_

Last summer, during the deadliest wildfire season in California’s history, MSNBC’s Chris Hayes got into a revealing Twitter discussion about why US television doesn’t much cover climate change. Elon Green, an editor at _Longform_, had tweeted, “Sure would be nice if our news
networks—the only outlets that can force change in this country—would cover it with commensurate urgency.” Hayes (who is an editor at large for The Nation) replied that his program had tried. Which was true: In 2016, All In With Chris Hayes spent an entire week highlighting the impact of climate change in the US as part of a look at the issues that Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were ignoring. The problem, Hayes tweeted, was that “every single time we’ve covered [climate change] it’s been a palpable ratings killer. So the incentives are not great.”

The Twittersphere pounced. “TV used to be obligated to put on programming for the public good even if it didn’t get good ratings. What happened to that?” asked @JThomasAlbert. @GalJaya said, “Your ‘ratings killer’ argument against covering #climatechange is the reverse of that used during the 2016 primary when corporate media justified gifting Trump $5 billion in free air time because ‘it was good for ratings,’ with disastrous results for the nation.”

When @mikebaird17 urged Hayes to invite Katharine Hayhoe of Texas Tech University, one of the best climate-science communicators around, onto his show, she tweeted that All In had canceled on her twice—once when “I was literally in the studio w[ith] the earpiece in my ear”—and so she wouldn’t waste any more time on it.
“Wait, we did that?” Hayes tweeted back. “I’m very very sorry that happened.”

This spring Hayes redeemed himself, airing perhaps the best coverage on American television yet of the Green New Deal. All In devoted its entire March 29 broadcast to analyzing the congressional resolution, co-sponsored by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Senator Ed Markey (D-MA), which outlines a plan to mobilize the United States to stave off climate disaster and, in the process, create millions of green jobs. In a shrewd answer to the ratings challenge, Hayes booked Ocasio-Cortez, the most charismatic US politician of the moment, for the entire hour.

Yet at a time when civilization is accelerating toward disaster, climate silence continues to reign across the bulk of the US news media. Especially on television, where most Americans still get their news, the brutal demands of ratings and money work against adequate coverage of the biggest story of our time. Many newspapers, too, are failing the climate test. Last October, the scientists of the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a landmark report, warning that humanity had a mere 12 years to radically slash greenhouse-gas emissions or face a calamitous future in which hundreds of millions of people worldwide would go hungry or homeless or worse. Only 22 of the 50 biggest newspapers in the United States covered that report.
Instead of sleepwalking us toward disaster, the US news media need to remember their Paul Revere responsibilities—to awaken, inform, and rouse the people to action. To that end, The Nation and the Columbia Journalism Review hereby announce Covering Climate Change: A New Playbook for a 1.5-Degree World, a project aimed at dramatically improving US media coverage of the climate crisis. When the IPCC scientists issued their 12-year warning, they said that limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius would require radically transforming energy, agriculture, transportation, construction, and other core sectors of the global economy. Our project is grounded in the conviction that the news sector must be transformed just as radically. This article is intended as a white paper, offering initial thoughts on how that can be done.

The project will launch on April 30 with a conference at the Columbia School of Journalism in New York City—a working forum where journalists will gather to start charting a new course. We envision this event as the beginning of a conversation that America’s journalists and news organizations must have with one another, as well as with the public we are supposed to be serving, about how to cover this rapidly uncoiling emergency. Judging by the climate coverage to date, most of the US news media still don’t get grasp the seriousness of this issue. There is a runaway train racing toward us, and its name is climate change. That is not alarmism; it is scientific fact. We as a civilization urgently need to slow that train down and help as many people off the tracks as possible. It's an enormous challenge, and if we don't get it right, nothing else will matter. The US mainstream news media, unlike major news outlets in
Europe and independent media in the United States, have played a big part in getting it wrong for many years. It’s past time to make amends.

You can’t solve a problem by ignoring it. Moderators did not ask presidential candidates a single question about climate change during the three prime-time general-election debates in 2016—or in 2012 or 2008 or ever. News stories about Hurricane Maria’s devastation of Puerto Rico, this spring’s floods in the Midwest, and other extreme-weather events almost never mention climate change, though scientists have been drawing the connection for decades. Instead, human-interest fluff prevails. In an 18-month period, TV and print outlets gave 40 times more coverage to the Kardashians than to the acidification of oceans caused by excessive amounts of carbon dioxide, according to a 2012 report by the press watchdog Media Matters.

This journalistic failure has given rise to a calamitous public ignorance, which in turn has enabled politicians and corporations to avoid action. According to polls by Pew and others, as recently as the 2016 presidential race, only half of the people in this country said they thought that climate change was occurring and was attributable to human activities, and only 27 percent said they knew that almost all climate scientists held this view. The other half of the population said climate change was either not happening or was a result of natural cycles. This 50-50 split has existed since at least 2006, the polls indicate. By December 2018, the number of Americans who said they were “somewhat worried” about climate change had risen to 69 percent, in part because many had now experienced its effects. Still,
only 29 percent said they were “very worried,” though “very worried” is exactly how most climate scientists have long felt.

Must it be this way? Is climate change too depressing to fit the happy-talk tone of most TV news? Has the gutting of newsrooms made it too logistically demanding a story to cover? Or are there deeper forces and habits at work?

US media have a history of covering the incremental at the expense of the immense and of coddling rather than confronting corporate power. If there is a media lesson to be drawn from the Trump years, it is that most of the profound problems of the United States—the ingrained racism, the xenophobia, the rank sexism—have been percolating for years, unnoticed by much of the American press; it took a singularly racist, sexist, xenophobic leader to finally force the media to reckon with the stew that had long been simmering.

Without a serious and immediate correction, the press will continue down the same path with climate change, except this time the implications are exponentially greater. Surely, it
can do better.

The urgent question is how: What are the climate stories that will resonate with viewers, listeners, and readers? What do those stories look like, concretely, and how can they be different from a status quo that is clearly failing? And even if journalists can figure out a new climate-coverage playbook, can they surmount the widespread public distrust of the press and the budget cutbacks that are ravaging newsrooms across the country?

*The Nation* and the *Columbia Journalism Review* were inspired to ask these questions by a piece that Margaret Sullivan, the media columnist at *The Washington Post*, wrote last fall. She was responding to that landmark IPCC report, *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, which warned that the previously accepted target of climate policy—limiting the temperature rise to 2°C above the preindustrial level—was far more dangerous than realized. The IPCC scientists warned that new research and real-world observations, such as the unexpectedly rapid melting of polar ice and sea-level rise, dictated a 1.5°C limit instead. Over the next 11 years, global emissions of carbon dioxide must therefore fall by a staggering 45 percent on the way to net zero by 2050. The challenge is technologically feasible and economically affordable, the scientists added, though there is “no documented historical precedent” for the scale of the changes required.

Sullivan, a former *New York Times* public editor whose *Post* column has become a critical watchdog for American journalism, articulated the challenge this way:
Just as the world, especially the United States, needs radical change to mitigate the coming crisis, so too for the news media.... This subject must be kept front and center, with the pressure on and the stakes made abundantly clear at every turn.... Just as the smartest minds in earth science have issued their warning, the best minds in media should be giving sustained attention to how to tell this most important story in a way that will create change.

So how would the media do that? And can they do it? The answer to both of these questions requires returning to the one that Hayes and his Twitter critics were debating: Why haven’t the media been covering the climate crisis thus far?

Judged strictly on journalistic grounds, climate change is a great story. Bill McKibben, who published the first mass-market book on the subject, *The End of Nature*, 30 years ago and who remains the most knowledgeable reporter on the beat, said that climate change is “an exciting story filled with drama and conflict. It’s what journalism was made for.” The struggle between the fossil-fuel industry and its opponents—a fight he joined as an activist when he co-founded the grassroots group 350.org in 2008—offers compelling characters and eye-catching visuals, not to mention high political and economic stakes: Witness the sit-in last November at House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office that spotlighted the Green New Deal. For years, the fight to respond to climate change has been the sort of David-and-Goliath story the press would normally love: oil-company CEOs and compliant legislators on the one hand, earnest environmentalists on the other. And yet it is a fight that has gotten only sporadic, mainly simplistic coverage.
Meanwhile, climate change touches virtually every beat in the newsroom, meaning that nearly every journalist has something to contribute to its coverage. For business reporters: Mark Carney, the governor of the Bank of England, has been warning for years that climate change could tank the world economy if the scientific imperative of leaving most remaining fossil fuels in the ground leaves investors holding trillions of dollars in “stranded assets.” For the national-security beat: Military leaders, in the US and abroad, have warned that drought, sea-level rise, and other climate impacts are threat multipliers that increase the likelihood of armed conflict and even nuclear war. Food production, human health, immigration, even the viability of baseball in increasingly hot summers—climate change touches nearly every aspect of American life and every facet of the American press.

Clueless in chief: President Donald Trump, who denies man-made climate change, gestures at maps of Hurricane Michael in 2018. (Reuters / Jonathan Ernst)

All of which is to say that the failure of news organizations to adequately cover the story is structural rather than the fault of environmental-beat reporters or climate experts. If
anything, those journalists are the drum-beating exceptions to the news industry's problem. The shortfall is everywhere else, as newsroom managers have failed to see the climate crisis as fundamental, all-encompassing, and worthy of attention from every journalist on their payrolls.

It is our great misfortune to live at a time when the global peril of climate change coincides with a structural undermining of the media's economic ability to cover a story of this magnitude. Newsroom budgets and staffs are being slashed. Specialized-beat reporters, who tend to be the most expensive, are being cut. Assignment editors rely too much on Twitter, a lazy habit that tends to work against a story like climate change, which requires a longer view and a willingness to challenge the pack.

Some of the best media coverage of climate change has come from local TV weathercasters, who are increasingly using their expertise to educate audiences about the science and what it means for their communities. “There has been a sea change in our profession in the past few years,” said Dan Satterfield, a meteorologist with WBOC in eastern Maryland who has been doing TV weather reporting for 39 years. “There are still a few of my colleagues around the country who’ve been explicitly ordered by management not to mention climate change on the air, but the vast majority of us no longer doubt the scientific reality of climate change, and we communicate that to our audiences.” Satterfield works at a Fox- and CBS-affiliated station, and he said his ratings are “number one in our market.”
For some time now, by far the best daily reporting on climate change has come from *The Guardian*, which covers the science, politics, economics, and health aspects throughout the world with great force and clarity (and recently started putting global carbon-dioxide levels in its weather reports). At *The Washington Post*, Chris Mooney provides authoritative, timely coverage of the most important advances in climate science. *The New York Times* has distinguished itself with multimedia presentations, including stunning visuals of ice sheets melting in Greenland captured by a drone-lofted camera.

But US journalism’s climate coverage cannot be judged solely by the work over the past few years at a few prestige outlets. Coastal elites may read the *Post* and the *Times*, but the American news media’s center of gravity remains the television networks and their local affiliates, whose audiences and political influence dwarf those of other outlets.

The sad fact is that the US media as a whole and television in particular have downplayed and distorted the climate story from the beginning, with devastating consequences. A big part of the reason our civilization today faces the prospect of extinction is that we have waited so long to take action, not least because the media left the public and policy-makers misinformed about the threat and its solutions. When the media weren’t ignoring the story, they were being suckered into misrepresenting it as a matter more of political opinion than of scientific fact. These failures were the climate equivalent of the journalistic derelictions that helped elevate Trump to the presidency in 2016: an obsession with political infighting over substance
and policy; a false equivalence of points of view, even when one of them was dubious or downright false; and a tendency to let a vocal, extreme minority define the debate, notwithstanding the facts.

The environmental danger of burning fossil fuels has been clear since 1988, when NASA scientist James Hansen testified before the US Senate that man-made global warming had begun and, if unchecked, would trigger destructive heat waves, droughts, and sea-level rises. The New York Times put the news on its front page, leading other outlets to follow up. Time named “Endangered Earth” as its “Planet of the Year” in 1988. Politicians responded as well: Running for president the same year, George H.W. Bush pledged to combat the greenhouse effect with “the White House effect.”

Had this journalistic and political trend continued, the earth likely would be facing a very different future today. Instead, the media lost interest in the story and, when they did cover it, fell victim to fossil-fuel-industry propaganda. With both scientific literacy and political courage in short supply in too many US newsrooms, the coverage of climate change declined in volume and quality. As a result, politicians felt no pressure to act, and the emissions kept climbing. Of all the greenhouse-gas emissions now overheating the oceans and atmosphere, 41 percent have occurred since 1990. In other words, even after being warned by NASA, we made the climate problem nearly twice as bad, in part because the media did not do what Sullivan urges today: keep the issue “front and center, with the pressure on and the stakes made abundantly clear at every turn.”
Perhaps the media's most damaging climate-change error has been to cover a science story as if it were a politics story. Beginning in the early 1990s, US print and broadcast outlets repeatedly presented climate-change stories and on-air debates as a disagreement between two equally valid viewpoints: one from a scientist who affirmed the consensus articulated by the vast majority of peer-reviewed studies, the other from a contrarian who disputed that consensus and, in many cases, was funded by fossil-fuel interests, though rarely was that association known or disclosed.

For example, a *Washington Post* article on March 28, 1995, asserted a “lack of international consensus on the causes and hazards of global warming” and quoted Piers Corbyn, a British weather forecaster (and, coincidentally, the brother of future Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn), who predicted that the theory of man-made climate change “will probably be regarded as the biggest scientific gaffe of the [20th] century.” From 1988 to 2002, 53 percent of the news stories about climate change in *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal,* and the *Los Angeles Times* “gave ‘roughly equal attention’ to the view that humans were contributing to global warming, and the other view that exclusively natural fluctuations could explain the earth’s temperature increase,” concluded an analysis of 3,543 newspaper articles published in the peer-reviewed journal *Global Environmental Change.*
Demanding action: Environmental activists occupy the office of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. (AP / J. Scott Applewhite)

News outlets defended their approach by citing the journalistic need for fairness, though in fact they were being fair to neither the science nor their audiences. John Oliver hilariously skewered this false balance in 2014 on HBO’s *Last Week Tonight*. “I think I know why people still think this issue is open to debate,” he said. “Because on TV, it is.” He then presented what he called the only “mathematically fair” way to depict the climate debate by cramming 97 scientists onto his set, surrounding three deniers.

Of all the reasons for this journalistic failure, perhaps the most decisive is also the most nefarious: For decades, ExxonMobil and the rest of the fossil-fuel industry deliberately deceived the press and thereby the public. Just as the tobacco industry, beginning in the 1960s, lied about the dangers of smoking and deployed a public-relations strategy dubbed “Doubt is our product,” so the fossil-fuel industry began lying in the 1990s about its product’s dangers. And it relied on the same public-relations strategies and tactics—even the same scientists—that Big Tobacco used.
The goal was to “reposition global warming as theory (not fact),” in the words of a corporate planning document leaked to the Sierra Club.

But the fossil-fuel industry’s lies succeeded only because US news organizations swallowed the industry’s propaganda and regurgitated it as supposedly objective news. The result was to mislead the American people and their elected representatives about the perils of climate change and to blunt any sense of urgency about reacting. In his new book, *Falter*, McKibben calls it “the most consequential cover-up in human history.”

Tellingly, this journalistic failure was a particularly American one: Major news outlets in Britain, Germany, and other countries did not fall for the industry’s disinformation campaign, nor did independent media in the United States. As far back as 1995, reporters at the leading German newsweekly *Der Spiegel* were astounded that US press coverage implied “that there is a debate over what’s happening to the global climate,” Ross Gelbspan reported in his book, *The Heat Is On*. “Except for your country, the only debates are how fast and with what impacts the changes will happen.” In 2006, Fiona Harvey, the environment correspondent for *The Financial Times* told *Vanity Fair*, “In the United States you have lots of news stories that, in the name of balance, give equal credence to the skeptics. We don’t do that here—not because we’re not balanced but because we think it’s unbalanced to give equal validity to a fringe few with no science behind them.”
Although the industry’s disinformation campaign was exposed in 2015 by *InsideClimate News* and also by the *Los Angeles Times* and the Columbia School of Journalism, most of the rest of the media have not reckoned with their decades of culpability. It’s not as if they weren’t warned. The “reposition as theory (not fact)” memo first appeared in *The New York Times* in 1991. Writing in *Vanity Fair* in 2006, Mark Hertsgaard, a co-author of this article, exposed the tobacco connection to climate denial, revealing that physicist Frederick Seitz received $45 million in funding from the R.J. Reynolds company to obscure smoking’s risks and then, with funding from fossil-fuel companies, became the highest-profile climate denier in the US, penning op-eds for *The Wall Street Journal* and other leading news outlets. In 2010, historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway published *Merchants of Doubt*, a comprehensive takedown of the industry’s deceits.

Few US news outlets still apply false equivalence to climate science today, but the underlying error—treating climate change as a political dispute rather than a scientific reality—continues to undermine coverage. As Carlos Maza of Vox points out in a video titled “Why you still don’t understand the Green New Deal,” mainstream reporting has failed spectacularly to perform the essential journalistic task of describing what a Green New Deal would actually do: mobilize the US government and economy to fight climate change by retooling energy, transportation, agriculture, and other sectors to create millions of jobs and business opportunities, much as the New Deal of the 1930s countered the Great Depression.
Maza’s video shows clip after clip of network-TV coverage that instead obsessed about what a Green New Deal would mean for Democratic and Republican prospects on Capitol Hill and in the 2020 presidential race. “Did Democrats give Republicans a huge 2020 gift?” asks Erin Burnett on CNN. “Are you concerned the perception of the Democratic Party is going to move too far to the left?” Meet the Press host Chuck Todd asks Tom Perez, the chair of the Democratic National Committee, on NBC. Such coverage, Maza explains, was an example of “tactical framing, an approach that focuses on strategy and polling rather than a policy’s substantive benefits.” Citing research by media scholars Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Capella, Maza adds that tactical framing not only deprives the public of the information needed to be informed voters but also “increases audiences’ cynicism” that the policy under discussion will be implemented.

Most Green New Deal coverage has also ignored climate science, failing to explain that, at this late date, a crash program to decarbonize is the only hope for keeping the temperature rise near 1.5°C. As a result, the Green New Deal’s critics—notably Trump and congressional Republicans—have been able to act as if that scientific imperative doesn’t exist. When Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell declared on March 26 that he believed in man-made climate change, most news coverage reported his remark credulously, without pressing McConnell for an explanation of this sudden reversal after decades of denial. Nor are Green New Deal critics being asked the other question that science
demands: If you don’t like the Green New Deal, then what is your plan to achieve the rapid decarbonization that science says is necessary for human survival?

If 1.5°C is the new limit for a habitable planet, how can newsrooms tell that story in ways that will finally resonate with their audiences? And given journalism's deeply troubled business model, how can such coverage be paid for? Some preliminary suggestions:

§ **Follow the leaders.** The fastest way to catch up is to emulate outlets that are already covering climate change well. You can’t do better than *The Guardian*, which has been running incisive stories and commentary for years. It has a team of nine full-time reporters and editors who focus on climate developments in Europe, the US, and the rest of the world. Part of the reason *The Guardian* can afford to do so is that its journalism is subsidized by a trust, freeing it of the business-model tensions faced by most other major news outlets. So one urgent question remains: If more news organizations are going to do justice to the story of climate change, how can such coverage be funded? Foundations like Knight, Ford, McCormick, and Emerson Collective are rightly increasing their support for local news organizations across the country. Other foundations should join this effort and earmark budgets for climate coverage at the local level.

Meanwhile, for broadcast outlets, Hayes’s Green New Deal special is worth studying. One can quarrel with the producers’ decision to stage the discussion in an auditorium crammed with hundreds of Ocasio-Cortez’s fans, but Hayes did an admirable job of explaining what the proposal is and isn’t and what stakes are involved. The congresswoman
share the stage for almost the entire program and did not disappoint, telling Hayes that she expected Republicans to attack her plan, but “didn’t expect them to make total fools of themselves” by falsely claiming that a Green New Deal would mean the end of cows. Each segment of the hour featured two additional guests who discussed the substantive elements of a Green New Deal, including how the policy would affect economic inequality and the politics of getting it implemented.

These aspects of the All In special—knowing the science, focusing on substance, attracting eyeballs without being frivolous—coexisted with something that almost never
happens in climate coverage: The talking heads were overwhelmingly people of color, and half were women. It’s a sad truism that the impacts of climate change punish nonwhite, nonmale, nonaffluent people the most, yet this point is rarely made in mainstream coverage, in part because the coverage is dominated by white men.

§ **Don't blame the audience, and listen to the kids.** The onus is on news organizations to craft the story in ways that will demand the attention of readers and viewers. The specifics of how to do this will vary depending on whether a given outlet works in text, radio, TV, or some other medium and whether it is commercially or publicly funded, but the core challenge is the same. A majority of Americans are interested in climate change and want to hear what can be done about it. This is especially true of the younger people that news organizations covet as an audience. Even most young Republicans want climate action. And no one is speaking with more clarity now than Greta Thunberg, Alexandria Villaseñor, and the other teenagers who have rallied hundreds of thousands of people into the streets worldwide for the School Strike 4 Climate demonstrations.

§ **Establish a diverse climate desk, but don't silo climate coverage.** The climate story is too important and multidimensional for a news outlet not to have a designated team covering it. That team must have members who reflect the economic, racial, and gender diversity of America; if not, the coverage will miss crucial aspects of the story and fail to connect with important audiences. At the same time, climate change is so far-reaching that connections should be made when reporting on nearly every topic. For example, an economics reporter could partner with a climate reporter to
cover the case for a just transition: the need to help workers and communities that have long relied on fossil fuel, such as the coal regions of Appalachia, transition to a clean-energy economy, as the Green New Deal envisions.

§ **Learn the science.** Many journalists have long had a bias toward the conceptual. But you can't do justice to the climate crisis if you don't understand the scientific facts, in particular how insanely late the hour is. At this point, anyone suggesting a leisurely approach to slashing emissions is not taking the science seriously. Make the time to get educated. Four recent books—McKibben's *Falter*, Naomi Klein's *On Fire*, David Wallace-Wells's *The Uninhabitable Earth*, and Jeff Goodell’s *The Water Will Come*—are good places to start.

§ **Don't internalize the spin.** Not only do most Americans care about climate change, but an overwhelming majority support a Green New Deal—81 percent of registered voters said so as of last December, according to Yale climate pollsters. Trump and Fox don't like the Green New Deal? Fine. But journalists should report that the rest of America does. Likewise, they should not buy the argument that supporting a Green New Deal is a terrible political risk that will play into the hands of Trump and the GOP; nor should the media give credence to wild assertions about what a Green New Deal would do or cost. The data simply do not support such accusations. But breaking free from this ideological trap requires another step.

§ **Lose the Beltway mind-set.** It's not just the Green New Deal that is popular with the broader public. Many of the subsidiary policies—such as Medicare for All and free day
care—are now supported by upwards of 70 percent of the American public, according to Pew and Reuters polls. Inside the Beltway, this fact is unknown or discounted; the assumption by journalists and the politicians they cover is that such policies are ultraleftist political suicide. They think this because the Beltway worldview prioritizes transactional politics: What will Congress pass and the president sign into law? But what Congress and the White House do is often very different from what the American people favor, and the press should not confuse the two.

Spreading the GND gospel: Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez discusses the Green New Deal on All In With Chris Hayes. (Reuters / Jeenah Moon)

§ Help the heartland. Some of the places being hit hardest by climate change, such as the Midwestern states flooded this spring, have little access to real climate news; instead, the denial peddled by Fox News and Rush Limbaugh dominates. Iconic TV newsman Bill Moyers has an antidote: “Suppose you formed a consortium of media that could quickly act as a strike force to show how a disaster like this is related to climate change—not just for the general media, but for agricultural media, heartland radio stations, local
television outlets. A huge teachable moment could be at hand if there were a small coordinating nerve center of journalists who could energize reporting, op-eds, interviews, and so on that connect the public to the causes and not just the consequences of events like this.” Moyers added that such a team should “always have on standby a pool of the most reputable scientists who, on camera and otherwise, can connect natural disasters to the latest and most credible scientific research.”

§ **Cover the solutions.** There isn’t a more exciting time to be on the climate beat. That may sound strange, considering how much suffering lies in store from the impacts that are already locked in. But with the Green New Deal, the US government is now, for the first time, at least talking about a response that is commensurate with the scale and urgency of the problem. Reporters have a tendency to gravitate to the crime scene, to the tragedy. They have a harder time with the solutions to a problem; some even mistake it as fluff. Now, with climate change, the solution is a critical part of the story.

§ **Don’t be afraid to point fingers.** As always, journalists should shun cheerleading, but neither should we be neutral. Defusing the climate crisis is in everyone’s interest, but some entities are resolutely opposed to doing what the science says is needed, starting with the president of the United States. The press has called out Trump on many fronts—for his lying, corruption, and racism—but his deliberate worsening of the climate crisis has been little mentioned, though it is arguably the most consequential of his presidential actions. Meanwhile, ExxonMobil has announced plans to keep producing large amounts of oil and gas
through at least 2040; other companies have made similar declarations. If enacted, those plans guarantee catastrophe. Journalism has a responsibility to make that consequence clear to the public and to cover the companies, executives, and investors behind those plans accordingly.

Although brilliant investigative journalism established in 2015 that ExxonMobil and others have been lying about the dangers of burning fossil fuels since the 1970s, this fact has not been incorporated into most ongoing news coverage. Leading figures in climate science and diplomacy have accused top fossil-fuel executives of crimes against humanity: They not only knew the damage their products would cause, but they also lied about it to continue profiteering. “This was a crime,” said Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, the chief climate adviser to Angela Merkel’s conservative government in Germany, in an interview for Hertsgaard’s book HOT. Tim Wirth, who as US under secretary of state helped negotiate the Kyoto Protocol—the international treaty that committed dozens of countries to curbing carbon emissions—in 1997, agrees: Those CEOs and political leaders who deny the well-established science of climate change “should be tried for crimes against humanity.”

Instead, climate deniers are still given respectful treatment by US news outlets across the ideological spectrum. The companies that funded the disinformation, the Republicans (plus a handful of Democrats) who carried their water on Capitol Hill, and the right-wing media machine that injected their lies into the public consciousness continue to be treated as legitimate participants in the debate. But these
entities in fact deserve to have their social licenses revoked, just as tobacco companies did. More than anyone else, it is climate deniers who got us into this mess; they don’t get to decide what we do about it now.

If American journalism doesn’t get the climate story right—and soon—no other story will matter. The news media’s past climate failures can be redeemed only by an immediate shift to more high-profile, inclusive, and fearless coverage. Our #CoveringClimateNow project calls on all journalists and news outlets to join the conversation about how to make that happen. As the nation’s founders envisioned long ago, the role of a free press is to inform the people and hold the powerful accountable. These days, our collective survival demands nothing less.

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