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COP21: thanks to our sponsors, the climate debate is open for business

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Whose message will be heard? EPA/Yoan Valat

Author



John Jewell

Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

The first thing that struck me about the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – helpfully shortened to **COP21** – was its scale. During the fortnight 195 countries will be represented by their leaders, innumerable civil servants, lobby groups, industrial interests, environmental delegations and, of course, hundreds of journalists.

According to the **BBC**, more than 40,000 people will participate in the talks. All of them will want to be heard and will compete for space in a news agenda dominated by the continuing crises in Syria and Iraq.

Greenpeace is cautiously optimistic about what the talks may achieve. It points to the historic China-US climate agreement of 2014 which indicated a move away from fossil fuels and the commitment of China and India to renewable energy. Though discussion on how we arrive at a world where temperatures rise no more than 2°C is the key point of COP21, global political consensus appears to have been reached on the immediacy of the need to tackle climate change.

Global political consensus is one thing, public consensus is another – because it seems that, even with 97% agreement on human caused global warming in the scientific community, citizens in the United States do not rank global climate change as one of the top threats facing the country.

Hearts and minds

As the PEW Research Centre reported last year, almost 50% of Americans rated global climate change as a major threat – well behind concerns over the threat of ISIS (67%), Iran's nuclear program (59%) and North Korea's nuclear program (57%). PEW found that in an international survey of the general public in 39 countries last year, Americans were among the least concerned about climate change threatening their country.

Why might this be the case? Perhaps it has something to do with how successfully industrial corporate interests have managed the environmental debate over the past couple of decades. Just last week the Washington Post highlighted a study by Justin Farrell, a Yale University sociologist, which reviewed 20 years of data illustrating the connection:

between corporate funding and messages that raise doubts about the science of climate change and whether humans are responsible for the warming of the planet. The analysis suggests that corporations have used their wealth to amplify contrarian views and create an impression of greater scientific uncertainty than actually exists.



Some of the corporate sponsors for COP21. Corporate Europe Observatory, Author provided

As the Washington Post also points out, the publication of Farrell's research arrives just two weeks after New York prosecutors announced an investigation into whether Exxon Mobil, the world's largest public energy company, misled the public and investors about the risks of climate change. And it was only in February that Greenpeace revealed Willie Soon, a researcher at the Harvard-Smithsonian Centre for Astrophysics, received a total of \$1.25m from Exxon Mobil, Southern Company, the American Petroleum Institute (API) and a foundation run by the Koch brothers who have been accused of giving close to US\$70m to climate change denial front groups.

False balance

This has only been part of the problem. False balance, which is, in Bob Garfield's colourful prose, the practice of giving equal media time and space to demonstrably invalid positions for the sake of supposed reportorial balance, has long been a recognised feature of the climate debate. A Media Matters for America study of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report in 2013 found that:

many mainstream media outlets amplified the marginal viewpoints of those who doubt the role of human activity in warming the planet, even though the report itself reflects that the climate science community is more certain than ever that humans are the major driver of climate change.

In his analysis of the findings Dana Nuccitelli hit the nail on the head: the 3% of climate contrarians were given a disproportionate amount of media coverage, creating the perception that there was a significant divide amongst climate experts. Nuccitelli noted that in their purported efforts to be "fair and balanced" and represent "both sides", media outlets were in fact creating an unbalanced perception of reality.



David Hammerstein
@DaHammerstein

Great artistic counter greenwashing at [#COP21Paris](#) against hypocritical corporate sponsorship of climate talks.

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False balance has been a problem in the UK, too – notably for the BBC. In 2014 the corporation’s radio flagship news programme, Today, faced criticism over an item where Lord Lawson, a renowned climate sceptic, shared airtime with Sir Brian Hoskins, the eminent climatologist. Their debate, reported the Guardian resulted in alleged scientific inaccuracies and a demonstration outside Broadcasting House by direct action group Climate Rush against the BBCs coverage. The chairman of parliament’s Science Technology Committee, Labour MP Andrew Miller, said of the BBC’s coverage of climate science in general:

Given the high level of trust the public has in its coverage, it is disappointing that the BBC does not ensure all of its programmes and presenters reflect the actual state of climate science in its output. Some editors appear to be particularly poor at determining the level of scientific expertise of contributors in debates, for instance, putting up lobbyists against top scientists as though their arguments on the science carry equal weight.

Big end of town

In the run up to COP21, Open Democracy’s Adam Ramsay drew attention to how the major industrial players were attempting to influence coverage in the UK press. Ramsay called out the New Statesman for running a double-page feature about energy policy and COP21 sponsored by EDF energy. In other publications he found many incidents of “advertising and coincidental coverage” – he featured an image of an article in the Spectator saying now is the time to buy crude oil while on the opposite page sits an advertisement inviting us to invest in what is a “crude awakening”.



Strictly business, you understand... Adam Ramsey/Open Democracy

Corporate involvement in COP21 is explicit and the official list of sponsors contains some of the least climate-friendly multinationals. But the world’s governments have to work with big business, so let’s hope the commitment to renewable energy is sincere and practical. For some, such as Exxon Mobil, it may be that fossil fuels are here to stay – at least for another generation.

In May 2015 the Wall Street Journal quoted Rex Tillerson, Exxon’s chairman and chief executive, as saying that “everyone agrees” that even three decades from now about 80% of the world’s energy supply will come from fossil fuels. “We think we’re in a business the world needs,” he said. “What we have to do is deliver in a way that is acceptable to the public.”

He’ll need the help of the media for that. So let’s hope the reporters covering COP21 are more inclined to listen to the science than the corporate spin.

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