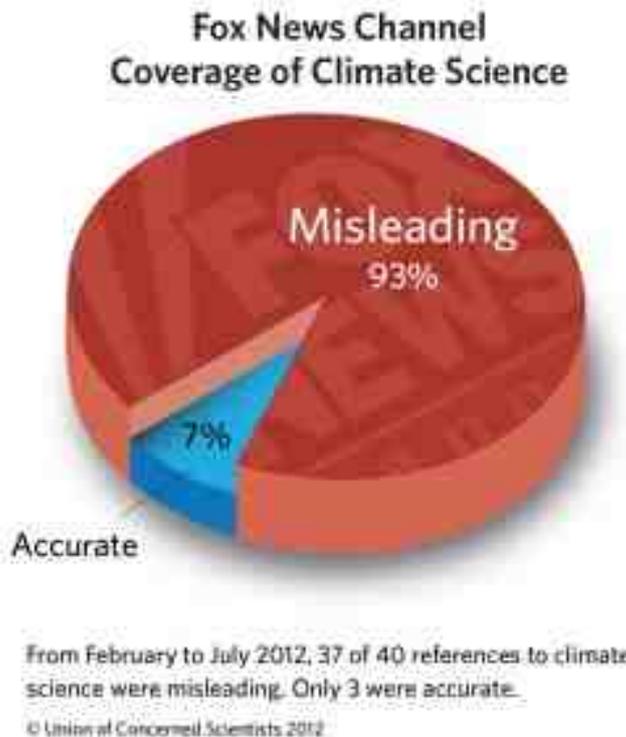


Fox News Distorts Climate Science

By [Philip Yam](#) | September 22, 2012 |  27

 [Share](#)  [Email](#)  [Print](#)



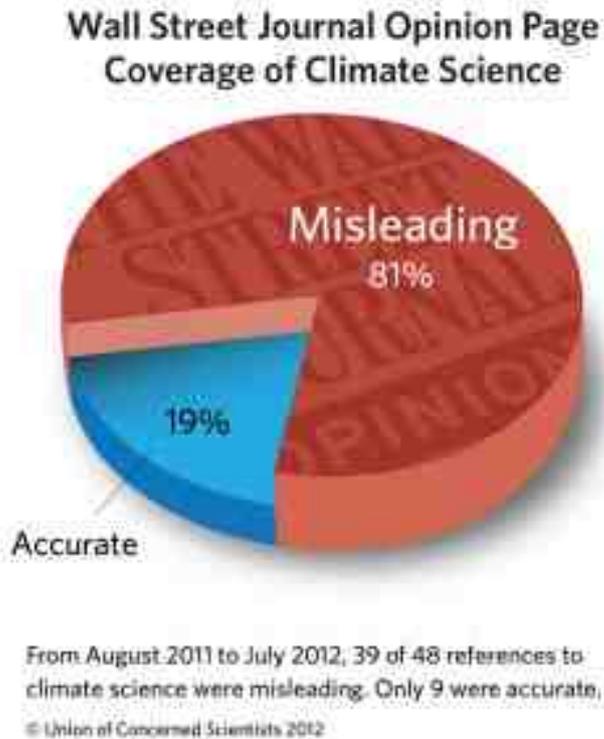
For anyone with an interest in journalism, it's no surprise that Fox News Channel and the opinion pages of *The Wall Street Journal* lean well to the right. Editorially, these two jewels of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. have a long history of denying human-induced global warming, in keeping with certain ideological interests.

New data support the anecdotes and conventional wisdom. At [a midday panel](#) on September 21 in New York City's [Science, Industry and Business Library](#), the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) released results of an analysis quantifying the media outlets' distortions of climate science.

In the six months from February to July 2012, the UCS searched for the terms "climate change" and "global warming" during primetime Fox News Channel programs, which consist of political commentary shows such as *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity*.

The UCS found that, in 37 of 40 instances, Fox News programs misled viewers about climate science—mainly, by broadly dismissing it. As an example, the UCS quotes an on-air statement from April 11, 2012: "I thought we were getting warmer. But in the '70s, it was, look out, we're all going to freeze." (The report didn't reveal the name of the actual source.) Fox News

hosts and guests also mocked and disparaged statements from scientists and drowned out genuine scientific assertions with cherry-picked data and false claims.



The *WSJ* opinion pages fared a bit better: only 81 percent of the 48 references to the climate key words were misleading, according to the UCS analysis. Such instances included a reference to climatologist [James Hansen](#) as an alarmist and an assertion that we are only in a global warming “bubble” that raises questions about the veracity of climate science and the “credibility of its advocates,” *WSJ* editors wrote. The few accurate statements came from readers’ letters to the editors, remarked Brenda Ekwurzel, a UCS climate scientist who presented the data at the panel. (The opinion pages are distinct from newsroom operations, which media researchers in 2010 actually [found to lean left.](#))

You can quibble with the UCS analysis—it did not look at *The New York Times* or MSNBC programs such as *The Rachel Maddow Show*, for example. But the results stay true to past incidents, [such as this doozy](#) in which a meteorologist asserted that thermodynamics makes global warming impossible. Indeed, News Corp. goes quite far in toeing the right-wing line, so much so that it even tried to [rewrite the history of the Internet](#) to deny the U.S. government’s creation of it.

Rather than surprising, the results might be more of a disappointment—to Rupert Murdoch himself. [Murdoch acknowledged in 2007](#) the reality of anthropogenic climate change and pledged that his company’s operations would become carbon-neutral—a [goal achieved](#) in 2011. Still, as the UCS data indicate, many of News Corp.’s most influential and powerful employees continue to perpetuate climate denialism.

Battles against antiscience are nothing new, of course. Groups that advocate scientific reasoning, such as [CSICOP](#) and the [Skeptical Society](#), have long tried to combat paranormal and pseudoscience beliefs and claims. But the fight has been a slog. When [I interviewed CSICOP founder Paul Kurtz](#) in 1996, he said that “we thought that if you just provide

information, people would reject” paranormal thinking. Clearly, that hasn’t worked. “The problem is more massive and complicated than we imagined,” he lamented.

Climate scientists face a similar challenge. As Angela Anderson, director of the UCS Climate and Energy program, stated at Friday’s panel, convincing people takes more than information. You must appeal to their values, too.

The shrill political programs on cable TV know that—I suspect that most of the 1.9 million viewers of Fox News primetime tune in to confirm their biases and bolster their belief that government and its regulations are forces for bad. The task ahead is to show that climate change is even worse—a tall order, for sure.



About the Author: Philip Yam is the managing editor of ScientificAmerican.com. Follow on Twitter [@philipyam](https://twitter.com/philipyam).
More »