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January 28, 2009

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New Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper Evaluates the Role of the Press in the Cap-and-Trade Debate

CAMBRIDGE, MA. — The American press reported the cap-and-trade debate as an economic argument with two equally balanced opposing sides, and in so doing has misrepresented “the great story of our time,” argues Eric Pooley in a new Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper: [“How Much Would You Pay to Save the Planet? The American Press and the Economics of Climate Change.”](#)

Pooley, a former managing editor of *Fortune* and chief political correspondent at *Time*, was a Kalb Fellow at the Shorenstein Center in the Fall of 2008. He is writing a book about the politics and economics of climate change.

In his discussion paper, Pooley argues that effective climate solutions require sound economic policy supported by a well-informed public.

“Well-designed policies are the key to reducing emissions while avoiding price spikes, and public support is the key to passing those policies into law. A vigorous press ought to be central to both climate policy and climate politics,” he says.

But the press has not been doing its job of educating the public, according to Pooley, and instead has chosen the role of “stenographer,” presenting both sides of the argument as having equal merit, when in fact opponents of climate change have been presenting doomsday economic forecasts based on faulty assumptions.

“The media’s decision to play the stenographer role,” Pooley charges, “helped opponents of climate action stifle progress.”

Pooley found that “most of the reporting was bad in the painstakingly balanced way of so much daily journalism—two sides, no real meat.” Asking the wrong question in the debate, the press focused on short-term costs of reducing carbon emissions rather than looking at the long-term societal costs of taking no action.

While the science debate has progressed, forming policies to limit emissions is still met with much opposition. Pooley describes the “gulf” between what science tells us is necessary and what politics tells us is possible, and “staring into this gulf is the price of admission to the climate beat.”

With declining budgets for press coverage, Pooley recognizes that even though well-informed reporters are needed now more than ever, "there aren't enough of them to be found." Editors have not allocated sufficient resources to the climate debate, and as a result, have minimized the detrimental effects of climate change, both environmental and economic.

Pooley's three basic conclusions are:

- The press misrepresented the economic debate over cap and trade. It failed to recognize the emerging consensus ... that cap and trade would have a marginal effect on economic growth and gave doomsday forecasts coequal status with nonpartisan ones The press allowed opponents of climate action to replicate the false debate over climate science in the realm of climate economics.
- The press failed to perform the basic service of making climate policy and its economic impact understandable to the reader and allowed opponents of climate action to set the terms of the cost debate. The argument centered on the short-term costs of taking action—i.e., higher electricity and gasoline prices—and sometimes assumed that doing nothing about climate change carried no cost.
- Editors failed to devote sufficient resources to the climate story. In general, global warming is still being shoved into the "environment" pigeonhole, along with the spotted owls and delta smelt, when it is clearly to society's detriment to think about the subject that way. It is time for editors to treat climate policy as a permanent, important beat: tracking a mobilization for the moral equivalent of war.

Read the full paper on the Shorenstein Center's website:

http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/papers/discussion_papers/d49_pooley.html