

# Deranged and Deluded: The Media's Complicity in the Climate Crisis

By [Media Lens](#)

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*In an important recent [book](#), the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh refers to the present era of corporate-driven climate crisis as 'The Great Derangement'. For almost 12,000 years, since the last Ice Age, humanity has lived through a period of relative climate stability known as the Holocene. When Homo sapiens shifted, for the most part, from a nomadic hunter-gatherer existence to an agriculture-based life, towns and cities grew, humans went into space and the global population shot up to over seven billion people.*

Today, many scientists believe that we have effectively entered a new geological era called the [Anthropocene](#) during which human activities have 'started to have a significant global impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems'. Indeed, we are now faced with severe, human-induced climate instability and catastrophic loss of species: the [sixth mass extinction](#) in four-and-a-half billion years of geological history, but the only one to have been caused by us.

Last Thursday, the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) moved their symbolic [Doomsday Clock](#) forward thirty seconds, towards apocalypse. It is now two and a half minutes to midnight, the closest since 1953. Historically, the Doomsday Clock represented the threat of nuclear annihilation. But global climate change is now also recognised as an '[extreme danger](#)'.

Future generations, warns Ghosh, may well look back on this time and wonder whether humanity was deranged to continue on a course of business-as-usual. In fact, many people alive today already think so. It has become abundantly clear that governments largely pay only lip service to the urgent need to address global warming (or [dismiss it altogether](#)), while they pursue policies that deepen climate chaos. As climate writer and activist Bill McKibben [points out](#), President Trump has granted senior energy and environment positions in his administration to men who:

know nothing about science, but they love coal and oil and gas – they come from big carbon states like Oklahoma and Texas, and their careers have been lubed and greased with oil money.

Rex Tillerson, Trump's US Secretary of State, is the former chairman and CEO of oil giant, ExxonMobil. He once [told](#) his shareholders that cutting oil production is 'not acceptable for humanity', adding: 'What good is it to save the planet if humanity suffers?'

As for Obama's 'legacy' on climate, renowned climate scientist James Hansen only [gives him a 'D' grade](#). Obama had had a 'golden opportunity'. But while he had said 'the right words', he had avoided 'the fundamental approach that's needed'. Contrast this with the [Guardian](#)

[view on Obama's legacy](#) that he had 'allowed America to be a world leader on climate change'. An [article](#) in the *Morning Star* by Ian Sinclair highlighted the stark discrepancy between Obama's actual record on climate and fawning media comment, notably by the BBC and the Guardian:

Despite the liberal media's veneration of the former US president, Obama did very little indeed to protect the environment.

And so while political 'leaders' refuse to change course to avoid disaster, bankers and financial speculators continue to risk humanity's future for the sake of making money; fossil fuel industries go on burning the planet; Big Business consumes and pollutes ecosystems; wars, 'interventions' and arms deals push the strategic aims of geopolitical power, all wrapped in newspeak about 'peace', 'security' and 'democracy'; and corporate media promote and enable it all, deeply embedded and complicit as they are. The 'Great Derangement' indeed.

Consider, for example, the notorious US-based Koch Brothers who, as The Real News Network [notes](#), 'have used their vast wealth to ensure the American political system takes no action on climate change.' Climate scientist Michael Mann is [outspoken](#):

They have polluted our public discourse. They have skewed media coverage of the science of climate change. They have paid off politicians.

He continues:

The number of lives that will be lost because of the damaging impacts of climate change – in the hundreds of millions. [...] To me, it's not just a crime against humanity, it's a crime against the planet.

But the Koch Brothers are just the tip of a state-corporate system that is on course to drive *Homo sapiens* towards a terminal catastrophe.

Earlier this month, the world's major climate agencies [confirmed](#) 2016 as the hottest since modern records began. The global temperature is now 1C higher than preindustrial times, and the last three years have seen the record broken successively – the first time this has happened.

Towards the end of 2016, scientists [reported](#) 'extraordinarily hot' Arctic conditions. Danish and US researchers were 'surprised and alarmed by air temperatures peaking at what they say is an unheard-of 20C higher than normal for the time of year.' One of the scientists said:

These temperatures are literally off the charts for where they should be at this time of year. It is pretty shocking.

Another researcher emphasised:

This is faster than the models. It is alarming because it has consequences.

These ‘consequences’ will be terrible. Scientists have [warned](#) that increasingly rapid Arctic ice melt ‘could trigger uncontrollable climate change at global level’.

It gets worse. A [new study](#) suggests that global warming is on course to raise global sea level by between six and nine metres, wiping out coastal cities and settlements around the world. Mann describes the finding, with classic scientific understatement, as ‘sobering’ and adds that:

we may very well already be committed to several more metres of sea level rise when the climate system catches up with the carbon dioxide we’ve already pumped into the atmosphere.

It gets worse still.

The Paris Climate Accord of 2015 repeated the international commitment to keep global warming below 2C. Even this limited rise would threaten life as we know it. When around a dozen climate scientists were asked for their honest opinion as to whether this target could be met, not one of them thought it likely. Bill McGuire, professor emeritus of geophysical and climate hazards at University College London, was most adamant:

there is not a cat in hell’s chance [of keeping below 2C].

But wait, because there’s even [worse news](#). Global warming could well be happening so fast that it’s ‘game over’. The Earth’s climate could be so sensitive to greenhouse gases that we may be headed for a temperature rise of *more than 7C within a lifetime*. Mark Lynas, author of the award-winning book, [Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet](#), was ‘[shocked](#)’ by the researchers’ study, describing it as ‘the apocalyptic side of bad’.

### Burying The Climate Issue

Given all of the above, what does it say about the British government that it should [bury](#) an alarming report about the likely impacts of climate change on the UK? These impacts include:

the doubling of the deaths during heatwaves, a “significant risk” to supplies of food and the prospect of infrastructure damage from flooding.

At a time of [manufactured fear](#) by ‘mainstream’ media about ‘[fake news](#)’ and ‘post-truth’ politics, how divorced from reality is the government when it would rather ignore such an important report, far less address seriously the urgent *truth* of climate chaos?

An [exclusive article](#) in the Independent noted that the climate report made virtually no impact when it was published on the government website of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) on 18 January:

despite its undoubted importance, Environment Secretary Andrea Leadsom made no speech and did not issue her own statement, and even the Defra Twitter account was silent. No mainstream media organisation covered the

report.

The government said in the ignored report that climate change meant that 'urgent priorities' needed to be addressed, including a dramatic rise in heat-related deaths, coastal flooding and 'significant risks to the availability and supply of food in the UK'. So, lip service at least. But Bob Ward, policy and communications director at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment in London, said he was 'astonished' that the government had done so little to publicise the report:

It's almost as if they were trying to sneak it out without people realising.

Leading politicians, intelligence chiefs and their media allies are forever [warning](#) the British public of 'security threats' which are so often blowback from Western foreign policy; or the warnings are overhyped claims to justify their own [fearmongering](#) agendas. But when it comes to the greatest threat of all – climate change – they are remarkably silent. This exposes as a lie the rhetoric from government and security services that they are motivated by genuine concern for the well-being of the population. The truth is that powerful forces are always driven primarily by the desire to preserve and boost their own interests, their own profits, their own dominance.

Amitav Ghosh rightly notes that the most powerful states derive their privileged position in large part by sitting atop a world-threatening carbon economy:

The fact is that we live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by empire and its disparities. Differentials of power between and within nations are probably greater today than they have ever been. These differentials are, in turn, closely related to carbon emissions. The distribution of power in the world therefore lies at the core of the climate crisis. (Ghosh, 'The Great Derangement', University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 146; our emphasis)

Tackling climate change thus means tackling global inequity. This requires a deep-rooted commitment to not just 'a redistribution of wealth but also to a recalibration of global power'. He makes the crucial point that:

from the point of view of a security establishment that is oriented towards the maintenance of global dominance, this is precisely the scenario that is most greatly to be feared; from this perspective the continuance of the status quo is the most desirable of outcomes. (Ibid., p. 143; our emphasis)

### The Myth Of 'Fearless and Free Journalism'

The 'mainstream' media is not somehow separate from this state-corporate status quo, selflessly and valiantly providing a neutral window into what powerful sectors in society are doing. Instead, the major news media are an intrinsic component of this system run for the benefit of elites. The media are, in effect, the public relations wing of a planetary-wide network of exploitation, abuse and destruction. The climate crisis is the gravest symptom of this dysfunctional global apparatus.

News reporting on the economy, for instance, is typically divorced from reporting on the

climate crisis. Judging by the [lack of attention](#) given to climate in last year's Autumn Statement, whether by Chancellor Philip Hammond himself or the media dutifully reporting on it, the global warming emergency had [miraculously gone away](#). It is as if there are two separate planets: one where 'the economy' happens; and another one, the real world, which is beset by catastrophic climate change.

Some readers will say: 'But surely the best media – the likes of the BBC, the *Guardian* and Channel 4 News – report climate science honestly and accurately?' Yes, to a large extent, they do a good job in reporting the science (though the BBC has often been guilty of '[false balance](#)' on climate). But they rarely touch the *serious, radical measures* needed to address the climate crisis, or the nature and extent of the [climate denial 'Beast'](#). This is taboo; not least because it would raise awkward questions about rampant neoliberalism addressed, for example, by Naomi Klein in her books [The Shock Doctrine](#) and [This Changes Everything](#).

As Ghosh also observes, capitalism and imperialism are intertwined as primary drivers of the climate crisis. But when did a BBC environment, economics or business correspondent ever report this truth? Their silence is shameful; all the more so for their avowed responsibility to the public who funds them. Even the very fact 'that we live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by empire and its disparities... remains largely unacknowledged.' (*Ibid.*, p. 146). It is certainly not acknowledged by the BBC and the rest of the major news media for which the public is supposed to be grateful. The [BBC](#) still reflects its origins in empire and the establishment while proclaiming [falsely](#) its 'independence' and 'impartiality'. Consider, for example, that Sir David Clementi, former deputy governor of Bank of England, has just been confirmed as the [new BBC chair](#). This, in a nutshell, is how the state-corporate media system operates. A former banker will become the new chair of the 'independent' BBC, appointed by the government. This is all part of the fiction of 'media plurality', 'impartiality' and 'freedom' from 'political interference'.

Even when the *Guardian* recently ran a [live page on climate change](#) on the day that President Trump took office, with a follow-up titled, '[So you want to be a climate campaigner? Here's how](#)', the paper's compromised worldview was all too apparent. The top of the *Guardian's* website [proudly proclaimed](#):

With climate sceptics moving into the White House, the Guardian will spend the next 24 hours focusing on the climate change happening right now, and what we can do to help protect the planet.

But you would have searched in vain for any in-depth analysis of how Big Business, together with co-opted governments, have hurled massive resources at [stifling](#) any real progress towards tackling climate change, and 'what we can do' about that. In particular, there was no *Guardian* commitment to drop any – never mind all – fossil-fuel advertising revenue. The proposal to reject ads from 'environmental villains' had been put to the paper by its own columnist [George Monbiot](#) in 2009, following a [challenge](#) from Media Lens. It got nowhere. Significantly, the *Guardian's* 'focused' climate coverage once again steered clear of its [own questionable behaviour](#) and its [structural ties](#) to elite money and power. Meanwhile, the paper continues to be riddled with ads promoting carbon emissions – notably [short-haul flights](#) and [cars](#) – ironically appearing right beside articles about dangerous global warming.

Even as such glaring contradictions, omissions and silences become ever more apparent to *Guardian* readers, the paper is ramping up its appeals for readers to dip into their

pockets. When Trump triumphed in the US election last November, Lee Glendinning, the editor of *Guardian US*, [pleaded](#):

Never has the world needed independent journalism more. [...] Now is the time to support journalism that is both fearless and free.

She deployed standard, self-serving *Guardian* rhetoric:

Because the Guardian is not beholden to profit-seeking shareholders or a billionaire owner, we can pursue stories without fear of where they might take us, free from commercial and political influence.

In repeatedly churning out the myth that the *Guardian* is 'free from commercial and political influence', any public doubts about its pure nature are supposed to be dispelled. But there comes a point where the readers know their intelligence is being insulted. And we are now well past that point.

The *Guardian's* complicit role as a liberal gatekeeper of truth will not – *cannot* – be honestly addressed by the *Guardian* itself; nor by the well-rewarded journalists and commentators who appear regularly in its pages.

The current era of 'great derangement' will last as long as the public allows news and debate to be manipulated by a state-corporate media system that is complicit in killing the planet. We urgently need to consider [alternatives](#) for the sake of humanity.

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