

Fresno State symposium: Journalists challenged to tell climate change story

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Tom Yulsman, director of the Center for Environmental Journalism at the University of Colorado, left, Fresno Bee reporter Mark Grossi, center, and professor Robert Hackett, from the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University talk during the roundtable portion of Thursday's annual Tatarian Symposium held at Fresno State's Satellite Student Union Thursday, April 3, 2014 in Fresno. **ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE**

Climate change is increasingly controversial and the media's handling of the subject often makes the issue one for heated arguments rather than thoughtful dialogue, two speakers at a Fresno State symposium said Thursday.

But can media coverage of climate change, global warming or whichever label gets used improve to increase understanding of something that is affecting parts of the world today and is sure to shape the globe into the future?

Climate change was the focus of Thursday's annual Tatarian Symposium series at California State University, Fresno, sponsored by the Department of Mass Communications and Journalism.

Journalists must be prepared to raise the level of dialogue to create a better informed public because highly charged debates from political extremes may gain audience share, but do little to help people learn, said Robert Hackett, a communications professor at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia.

He said a gap exists between the climate change crisis and the dominant news media. There is nearly as much attention given to those who deny climate change -- critics with almost no scientific background -- as is offered to scientists. Hackett said the two sides don't deserve equal weight.

"In some ways we need to discard some of the practices that have been associated with objectivity if we are actually going to do productive journalism," he said.

He suggests reducing reliance on government sources and instead focus more on people who are suffering because of government policies.

"We need more objective reporting in the sense of being inclusive, accurate and complete, but less objective in the way that that's traditionally been defined in terms of focusing only on official sources, today's events and two-sided conflict," Hackett said.

Tom Yulsman, a professor at the University of Colorado's Center for Environmental Journalism, was a little more optimistic despite less emphasis in the media today on the long-form scientific or investigative story.

He said it's up to journalists to understand who they talk to and know who they represent.

Yulsman said that scientific proof of climate change exists. He displayed a graph depicting the 10,885 peer-reviewed climate articles written in 2013. Pointing to a tiny sliver near the top of the graph, he said that only two of those peer-reviewed articles rejected the idea that Earth is warming and that humans are the problem.

But scientists, he said, always place caveats in their studies and that's when opponents pounce.

When scientists lack definitive explanations, others take advantage by exploiting nuances and attempt to "manipulate you into thinking that we don't have to worry about climate change."

The California drought is an example that lacks definite answers, he said. Scientists would say they could expect such a drought of greater intensity, frequency and length in a warming world without saying with certainty that the two are connected, Yulsman said.

He also can't say for sure.

In Colorado, there is a reduced snowpack this winter, similar to the Sierra.

"Is your snowpack this particular year being only 32% of average, is it climate change?" he asked. "I would caution you when you hear people ask that question. Really, climate change is a much longer-term thing. ... It's measured over the course of decades."

Yulsman said that weather-related issues such as the California drought and reduced snowpacks are occurring with greater frequency.

Reduced snowpacks are obvious in the Sierra and have exposed secrets the mountain range has kept for decades, said Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee's environmental reporter.

He pointed to the 2005 and 2006 discoveries of bodies in a plane that crashed on a 1942 training mission on the Mendel Glacier at 12,500-foot elevation in the John Muir Wilderness of eastern Fresno County.

Grossi, who is among the most senior environmental writers in California, went to the glacier for a reporting project. He didn't find a body, but discovered the location of the plane, saw the engine, gas tank and wing.

"The glacier melted out at that point, but the body was mummified and preserved in the ice," he said of the first body discovered. "Because of global warming, this was coming up."

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