Climate Feedback site allows scientists to correct media errors

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Interested readers can visit the website ClimateFeedback.org to see what climate scientists thought of original articles in the media

In one case, a writer claimed a mini Ice Age would befall Earth in 15 years. In another, an op-ed touted global warming as saving countless people from freezing to death.

A new project called Climate Feedback, run by a French scientist living in California, took these and other stories to task, and in the past year has critiqued climate change stories in the New York Times, Rolling

Stone, the Telegraph, Forbes magazine, the Wall Street Journal and more.

Interested readers can visit the website ClimateFeedback.org to see what climate scientists thought of the original article.

The site uses web annotation software to enable line-by-line critiques from more than 100 volunteer scientists, pointing out what they see as errors, falsehoods and misrepresentations.

Founder Emmanuel Vincent, 31, said the project is about communication, not activism.

"We see it as a scientific endeavor," said Vincent, who is from the southern French village of Lignan sur Orb, near Montpellier, and works as a project scientist at the University of California, Merced.

"We try to be neutral and explain the science and why some people get it wrong in the media."

Vincent said the site is aimed at the general public, but particularly journalists, editors, and those who influence public opinion.

He is currently raising money to do even more by launching a "Scientific Trust Tracker" that would grade various media on reliability when it comes to climate change stories.

The US space agency, on its NASA Climate Twitter handle, called the project "a win for science and a win for climate reporting."

Mixed response

In some cases, the critiques have resulted in corrections, including the

Telegraph article that claimed a mini Ice Age was imminent.

But others have not, such as a pair of Forbes articles—one that featured a listicle of alleged global warming "lies" and another that claimed NASA denied any retreat of polar ice.

They garnered hundreds of thousands of views online but were never corrected, despite being described as "deeply inaccurate and misleading by the more than 20 scientists who reviewed them," according to ClimateFeedback.org.

Another popular target is Bjorn Lomborg, the Danish author of the 2001 best-seller, "The Skeptical Environmentalist," who frequently writes about the politics and economics of climate change.

Lomborg's opinion articles have been graded "very low" in terms of scientific credibility, and Climate Feedback scientists accuse him of "cherry-picking" data to back up his arguments, mainly that global warming has some benefits—including the bit about saving people who might have frozen—and that climate alarmism doesn't lead to effective solutions.

In an interview with AFP, Lomborg said he was "quite shocked" by the site's critiques, and disagreed with their tactics.

"They are having people pretend to talk science but they are really talking politics," he said.

"Because they are saying unless you say something that shows global warming is bad, you are wrong," he added.

Lomborg said he believes he is writing for a sophisticated audience that understands—as he does—that climate change is happening and is

dangerous.

"The current way we are tackling it is incredibly ineffective," he said.

"Making it about only the negatives—if you are only allowed to talk about that—actually makes this a very, very poor way to be informed."

Under the microscope

So what is the best way to communicate about climate change?

Denial and skepticism about climate change remain a problem in the United States, where a recent Gallup poll found that one in three people do not blame human activity for global warming, and 57 percent do not see climate change as a serious threat.

Some say the media is to blame for these beliefs.

Meteorologist Eric Holthaus wanted to find a way to cut through the scientific jargon for readers of Rolling Stone in a piece titled "Point of No Return: Climate Change Nightmares are Already Here."

During the editing process, a climate scientist Holthaus respected said he liked the piece but feared Holthaus may have been to straightforward, too direct, too certain in assertions.

So Holthaus volunteered to have his story put under the microscope by Climate Feedback scientists.

Their review was mixed. They found no errors, but some commented on research he'd failed to mention, or found fault with the lack of links to original science articles.

"Maybe the scientists were reading it as if they were reading a formal journal article, and not necessarily a piece that is written to the same audience that reads music reviews," Holthaus told AFP.

He described the process as a "learning opportunity" that nevertheless raised many questions.

"If they are trying to fact check all of climate journalism, that seems to be a big task and then even you have to ask the question, what is the point of that?"

He also said relying on readers to go to ClimateFeedback.org to check an article that they may have read elsewhere, and expecting it would change their views "seems a little bit idealistic."

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