

Media Observers Applaud L.A. Times Policy on Climate Letters to Editor

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Sara Peach

Calling it 'healthy,' 'a no-brainer,' and 'ethical,' media watchers generally praise the Los Angeles Times decision to no longer publish letters to the editor that outright deny a human role in global warming.

Alerts & Newsletters Jobs Can Help



Open the *Los Angeles Times*' opinion pages, but don't go there in pursuit of letters to the editor claiming there's no evidence humans play a role in global warming.

It's not for a lack of such letters. Paul Thornton, the *L.A. Times*' letters editor, wrote in [an October column](#) that the newspaper receives plenty of letters claiming that global warming is a hoax or a liberal scheme.

But Thornton said the *L.A. Times* simply will no longer consider publishing them.

"I do my best to keep errors of fact off the letters page," he wrote. Citing [the most recent report](#) by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — which offered a 95-percent level of confidence that people are contributing to global warming — Thornton argued that continuing to deny human involvement in climate change "is not stating an opinion, it's asserting a factual inaccuracy."

Thornton's column won [praise](#) from environmentalists and accusations of censorship from [some climate skeptics](#).

Also see:

[A Note from the Editor on the L.A. Times 'Letters' Policy](#)

In recent interviews with *The Yale Forum*, most media watchers and scholars argued that the approach is ethical and that other news organizations should adopt a similar policy.

"Flat-out statements of untruth, I think, don't deserve protection," said Todd Gitlin, professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University. "And in fact, I think the policy is healthy — if they tailor it properly, that is, if it's properly discriminating — I think it should actually be emulated by the other papers."

The Role of Facts: No 'Flatly False' Letters ... But ...

Many major newspapers print letters to the editor skeptical of climate science. Media Matters for America, a left-leaning media watchdog, [reported recently](#) that *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA TODAY*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* have each published at least one letter in 2013 questioning any human role in global warming.

In [interviews with Mother Jones](#), the editors of major newspapers said they have a range of approaches to letters skeptical of climate change.

Brian Gallagher, editorial page editor at *USA Today*, told *Mother Jones* that his paper won't print letters that are "flatly false." On the other hand: "Sometimes the 5 percent is right," he said. "You have to give people who believe the 5-percent opinion their say."

Gitlin, the Columbia professor, said in an interview with *The Yale Forum* that it can be dangerous to censor dissenting opinions. He said newspapers probably should print a "very carefully tailored" letter questioning climate science.

"Obviously, free expression is the default position. I mean, one should bend over backward to open it up," he said. "Expression of opinion needs to be safeguarded and cherished — but that's not the same thing as making up facts."

So why not evaluate letters on a case-by-case basis rather than issuing a ban?

Gitlin noted that all bans require case-by-case interpretation unless they're as simple as "Do not use the phrase 'so-called climate change'" or "Do not say scientists are divided on the causes of climate change."

"For more complex statements, some case-by-case reasoning is required," he said. "But the general principle should be: No denial of facts."

For example, Gitlin said he would ban letters claiming that creationism is a science, but not letters claiming that creationism is true because the Bible says so.

"So statements like 'there is no sign that human activity has caused global warming' or 'global warming is not taking place' — those are both untruths," he said. "They are, I think, legitimately excised. That to me is pretty much a no-brainer."

Nor would the *L.A. Times* see a need to run a column saying the paper would no longer publish letters claiming aliens exist or that women are inferior, said Alexis Sobel Fitts, assistant editor at the *Columbia Journalism Review*. And she said the *L.A. Times* policy still leaves room to publish letters that question climate science without denying a human role.

"This is just a very narrow step toward stopping a debate which isn't happening in the scientific sphere," Fitts said. "It's not even that courageous a decision."

The Specter of 'False Balance'

Several observers expressed concern that by printing letters that deny the scientific consensus, newspapers give too much weight to well-debunked scientific claims.

Because an op-ed page has limited space, Fitts said, a newspaper might have room to print only one letter from a climate scientist, even though a thousand scientists might share that same point of view. If the newspaper prints a second letter denying climate science, that creates false balance, she said.

"If it's not a debate that's taking place in the academy, in science, then there really shouldn't be room for that same debate to happen in an op-ed page, because it's misrepresenting," she said.

James Gerstenzang, a former *L.A. Times* reporter who now is the editorial director of the [Safe Climate Campaign](#), said it doesn't serve readers to create false balance on the matter of climate change.

"You don't want to put in facts that aren't facts, and you don't want to put in material from people who are deliberately and intentionally wrong," he said.

Bill Adair, creator of [PolitiFact](#) and professor of journalism and public policy at Duke University, likened the *L.A. Times* policy to NPR's revised ethics handbook. That document, released in 2012, [emphasized](#) being "fair to the truth" and said that when the balance of evidence weighs heavily on one side of a controversy, NPR should acknowledge it.

"That was another moment where a news organization said the most important service we can do to our readers is to give them accurate information, and we can actually do a disservice if we allow voices to misrepresent what science is saying," Adair said.

Editors often strive to print letters reflecting the diversity of opinions in their community. But on the issue of whether human activities are contributing to global warming, the media watchers said, the debate no longer is productive.

"There has been a thorough airing of all sides of the climate debate for many years. But at some point, you have to acknowledge what scientists have found," Adair said. "Now it's time to move on with the conversation."

Journalism Ethics and Transparency Questions

Jane Kirtley, director of the Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and Law at the University of Minnesota, said news organizations have a perfect right, legally and ethically, to cease publication of climate-denying letters.

The key, she said, is to be open about rules related to letters and online comments — especially as news transitions

more and more to online distribution.

“A lot of news organizations are still trying to figure out where they fit on that spectrum, whether they are going to continue to curate letters the way they did in the old media, or whether they’re going to be a free-for-all online,” she said. “They should be transparent about their policies, upfront about them — not mislead people about what they’re going to do and what they’re not going to do.”

Gerstenzang of the Safe Climate Campaign said the *L.A. Times*’ policy is in line with decades-old newsroom ethical standards.

“The ethics of good journalism aren’t changing,” he said. “It’s more a matter of sticking with the traditional and conventional and historical standards of good journalism — of getting it right and not misleading the reader.”

So, should other news organizations adopt similar policies?

Yes, said Adair of Duke: “Others should follow the *L.A. Times*’ lead.”

Others no doubt won’t see things exactly the same way: it is, after all, an issue involving climate change, so ongoing disagreement is likely to be part of the landscape for some time.>

A Note from the Editor on the *L.A. Times* ‘Letters’ Policy

The *L.A. Times* action raises interesting, and in some ways troubling, questions about journalism/climate change practices.

The move restricting some climate “denier” letters to the editor deserve to get the water cooler buzz going in serious newsrooms around the country. And also in journalism classrooms.

There’s no question that responsible editing should entail a goal of keeping flat-out untruths out of the newspaper, not only in news copy but also in columns and even letters to the editor. That’s the goal notwithstanding it’s being ultimately unachievable as an absolute.

The *L.A. Times* does well to respect that practice in its Letters policy, where so many are far less scrupulous. If one could only see what passes for “science” in the rambling letters pages of so many of this nation’s weeklies...But I digress.

Whether achieving that ultimate goal necessitates doing it proactively and in advance of receiving and reviewing submitted letters is a different question, one going beyond the merits of the goal itself.

Why not just carry out that “no-untruths” approach on a case-by-case basis, rather than issue a blanket doors-closed ultimatum? And if the latter indeed is justified in the case of climate change...what makes this issue different from any other science issue in the news — evolution and creationism, vaccines and autism, smoking and cancer, warmer water expands, others?

Keeping known untruths out of Letters to the Editor? Hooray! Shouldn’t that be a universal objective for responsible media? If so, are there other examples where leading papers have taken such a preemptive approach? Or do they do it instead on a case-by-case basis, as when the potentially offending letter arrives?

And if they’re doing so preemptively only on climate change...what makes this issue so different, so unique? Is it just the volume of mail the subject generates — okay, call it spam in many cases — that makes it impractical to handle on a case-by-case basis?

Those floods of incoming for sure can be burdensome. But there must be more to it. What goes here?

Bud Ward

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