

Foreign Policy Association of Harrisburg
P.O. Box 60665
Harrisburg, PA 17106

Media and Its Impact on Foreign Policy

Scribed by Howard Davison

Donald A. Brown, Professor and Scholar in Residence for Sustainability Ethics and Law at Widener University School of Law in Harrisburg, is a global expert on the ethics of human-caused climate change. He addressed the topic by speaking about the media's lack of coverage of this very serious issue.

Mr. Brown, who has written extensively on climate change and lectured on it in 35 countries, said that the scientific community is convinced that current climate change is human-caused. The drivers of natural warming are well understood and are mostly due to changes in the sun-earth orbital relationship and the changing tilt of the earth's axis which are on well-known cycles. If current climate change were the result of natural causes the earth would be warming differently. All nineteen of the major academies of science around the world support the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) conclusions on the human causation of climate change. Every country at the UN Climate Summit, to which Mr. Brown was a member of the US delegation, agreed that current climate change is human-caused. And yet, several countries, including the United States along with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq, have taken obstructionist positions on measures to combat human caused climate change. The United States representatives have argued that the science is uncertain and that measures to curb it would cost jobs. Mr. Brown refuted both these arguments.

Mr. Brown considers this an ethical issue. He pointed out that the countries that are most responsible for the problem (the wealthier countries that tend to emit the most greenhouse gases), are not the ones that will suffer the most from the climate change they are causing. Poor countries are most affected. In some cases, e.g. islands in Oceania and countries on the continent of Africa, these effects can be catastrophic. The victims can do nothing to protect themselves other than hope that the perpetrating countries will change.

The countries of the world face the problem of limiting global warming to 2 degrees centigrade. Above 2 degrees centigrade, warming becomes non-linear (temperatures start rising even faster) as icebergs and the polar ice caps melt and the earth absorbs more energy from the sun. The key question facing these countries is how to allocate the remaining allowable greenhouse gas emissions above which we will suffer greater than 2 degrees centigrade of warming. Ethically, this is a distributive issue. Countries that are the largest emitters of greenhouse gases (e.g. United States and China) need to curb emissions faster than the others.

Why isn't the media helping to shape public policy on this important issue? Currently, fossil fuel interests are shaping the question. Disinformation campaigns from organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and the

George C. Marshall Institute are using sophisticated marketing techniques to try to convince people that climate change is not a real problem. These are some of the same techniques and organizations that were involved in tobacco disinformation campaigns.

Mr. Brown believes that a social movement in which the majority of people say it is unacceptable to waste energy is required to curb this problem. Ninety-seven percent of the scientists of the world are there. The media could play an important role in getting the rest of us there.

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