

Rising Temperatures, Differing Viewpoints: A Case Study on the Politics of Information



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In their *New York Times* article titled, “REPORT BY EPA LEAVES OUT DATA ON CLIMATE CHANGE,” Andrew Revkin and Katharine Seelye describe how a soon-to-be-released Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) report on the state of the environment has been edited by the White House to “play down” a section describing the risks and causes of global warming. The editing eliminated references to many studies concluding that global warming is at least partly caused by concentrations of smokestack and tailpipe emissions, and that these elements could threaten human health and the health of the environment.

In the EPA report, White House officials deleted information from one study concluding that global temperatures had risen sharply in the previous decade when compared to the previous 1,000 years. Officials substituted for this a reference to another study, partly financed by the American Petroleum Institute, questioning that conclusion. Also, in the report’s summary statement on the climate, the White House removed the sentence, “Climate change has global consequences for human health and the environment.” This wording was replaced with the following: “The complexity of the Earth’s system and the interconnections between its components make it a scientific challenge to document change, diagnose its causes and develop useful projections of how natural variability and human actions may affect the global environment in the future.”

Drafts of the original EPA report, with the White House’s changes, were leaked to the *New York Times*, along with internal agency memoranda in which some agency officials protested the changes. Two EPA officials, speaking under the condition of anonymity, confirmed that these documents were authentic.



What overriding message is being communicated by the *New York Times* article?

In an interview responding to questions concerning the Revkin and Seelye article, the EPA’s administrator, Christine Todd Whitman, stated, “As it [EPA] went through the review, there was less consensus on the science and conclusions on climate change. So, rather than go out with something half-baked, or not to put out the whole report, we felt it was important for us to get this out, because there is a lot of really good information that people can use to measure our successes.” Also in response to questions about the article, James Connaughton, who is chairman on the White House advisory group, Council on Environmental Quality, said, “It would be utterly inaccurate to suggest that this administration has not provided quite an extensive discussion about the state of the climate. Ultimately, EPA made the decision to not include the section on climate change because we had these ample discussions of the subject already.”

Five days after the release of the *New York Times* article, another article appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* titled, “EPA IS UPBEAT, BUT SEEKS STUDY OF RISE IN ASTHMA.” This article, also about the EPA’s report on the environment, was written by staff reporter, John Fialka. The article begins, “The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued its first overall assessment of the nation’s environment, saying that the quality of the nation’s air, water and land appears to be improving or ‘holding its own’ under the increasing stress of a growing economy and a growing population.”

In the article, Fialka provides a selection of some of the report’s major findings. The findings he lists are:

- “Overall air quality has improved, based on measures of six pollutants that have declined 25% over the last 30 years.”
- “In 2002, 94% of the nation’s population had access to community water systems that meet health-based drinking-water standards, as opposed to 79% in 1993.”
- “Uncontrolled releases of toxic wastes have dropped 48% since 1988, and the amount of municipal solid waste recovered by recycling or composting has increased 1,100% in the last decade.”

The Fialka article contains one sentence regarding White House editing of the EPA’s report. The sentence reads, “A two-page summary of the EPA’s view was deleted after the White House and other federal agencies disagreed with the agency’s assessment that man-made emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases are artificially warming the atmosphere.”



What overriding message is being communicated by the *Wall Street Journal* article?

Questions

1. Is this case study a primary or a secondary source of information?
2. What overriding message is being communicated by the information in this case study?
3. What information is missing from this case study?
4. List two possible reasons (or motives) for the publishing of each of the two articles cited in this case.
5. Which of the following best describes the information presented in this study?
 - a. Differing opinions regarding which parts of the EPA report are newsworthy
 - b. Conflicts within the science community
 - c. Differing political agendas
 - d. Conflicts between scientists and politicians
6. List two reasons for your answer to question 5 above.
7. Based on this case study and on your course readings, what criteria should one use to evaluate news stories?

Further Reading

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2003). *EPA’s Draft Report on the Environment*. Retrieved July 1, 2005, from <http://www.epa.gov/indicators/roe/html/roePDF.htm>

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