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Industry-funded climate crank becomes a media darling

A new study examining TV news coverage of federal proposals to regulate global warming pollution has turned up evidence of journalistic malpractice when it comes to accurately informing viewers about one of the most critical issues of our time.

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It also shows how the mainstream media turned a relatively obscure climatologist into a star -- despite the fact that he's often wrong on the science.

This week *Media Matters for America* released its [analysis](#) of television news guests who have discussed the Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. It studied guests who appeared on Fox News, Fox Business Network, MSNBC, CNBC and CNN, and on the nightly and/or Sunday news programs of ABC, CBS, NBC or Fox Broadcasting Co. between December 2009 and April 2011.

The analysis found that guests opposed EPA regulations 76 percent of the time, with only 18 percent in favor of stricter rules. It also found that in 17 months of coverage, only one guest who appeared to discuss the issue was an actual climate scientist -- and that was Patrick Michaels, a Virginia-based climatologist who has come under fire from his mainstream colleagues for spreading misinformation and for being heavily funded by fossil fuel interests.

Michaels (*in photo*), who holds a doctorate in ecological climatology from the University of Wisconsin, [left his position](#) at the University of Virginia in 2007 amid controversy over his climate science skepticism and industry funding. He currently serves as senior fellow in environmental studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C., and holds the post of distinguished senior fellow in public policy at George Mason University in Virginia.

Cato was co-founded by conservative activist Charles Koch, the billionaire co-owner of Koch Industries, one of the largest privately held companies in the United States and one with extensive oil holdings. Cato is [heavily funded](#) by Charles Koch and his brother David, who sits on the organization's board of directors. George Mason University in northern Virginia's Fairfax County also [receives significant funding](#) from the Kochs -- over \$29 million since 1985.

In addition, Michaels is the principal behind New Hope Environmental Services, a consulting firm he founded in 1994. In an [affidavit](#) [pdf] filed in a Vermont court case, Michaels described the firm's role as to "publicize findings on climate change and scientific and social perspectives that may not otherwise appear in the popular literature or media." Hired in the Vermont case by General Motors, DaimlerChrysler, and other auto industry interests to challenge state regulation of greenhouse gases, Michaels eventually decided against testifying in order to protect his clients' confidentiality.

However, various leaks and investigations have revealed his funders have included the Edison Electric Institute, the Western Fuels Association, Intermountain Rural Electric Association, and the former Center for Energy and Economic Development, now known as the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity. In a 2010 CNN interview, Michaels [estimated](#) that about 40 percent of his funding came from the oil industry alone.



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While Michaels doesn't dispute the basic scientific principles behind the greenhouse effect on climate, he promotes the ideas that global warming will be minor and may even be beneficial, and that there is little humans can do to address the problem. But many of his claims have come under criticism from leading climate scientists:

* Last November, Michaels testified before Congress that human emissions of greenhouse gases were responsible for less than half of the warming that's occurred since 1950. However, climate researcher Benjamin Santer of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory [deemed](#) Michaels' assertions "not credible" because he ignored key data.

* In 2009, Michaels in his role with Cato circulated a [draft advertisement \[pdf\]](#) that claimed surface temperature changes over the previous century were "episodic and modest" and that there was "no net global warming for over a decade now." The scientist-written blog RealClimate [debunked](#) Michaels' claims as "nonsense."

* In 2004, Michaels co-published a paper with Canadian climate scientist and global warming skeptic Ross McKittrick that purported to show a significant portion of warming could be [explained by economic factors](#). But it turned out that all of their numbers were wrong because they [confused degrees and radians](#).

* Michaels has even come under criticism from industry scientists. An internal 1995 document of the Global Climate Coalition, a now-defunct industry front group, examined the case made by Michaels and other climate skeptics and [found](#) that "they do not offer convincing arguments against the conventional model of greenhouse gas emission-induced climate change."

John Holdren, a Harvard University physicist whose work has focused on global environmental change, [told \[pdf\]](#) the U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee back in 2003 that Michaels "has published little if anything of distinction in the professional literature, being noted rather for his shrill op-ed pieces and indiscriminate denunciations of virtually every finding of mainstream climate science." Tom Wigley, one of the world's leading climate scientists, [has observed](#) that "many of the supposedly factual statements made in Michaels' testimony are either inaccurate or are seriously misleading."

What does it say about the state of U.S. TV news that such a person has been elevated to the status of star expert?

(Photo of Michaels from the Cato Institute website.)



By Sue Sturgis on June 8, 2011 12:10 PM 0 0 Votes

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