

Why Is *USA Today* Willingly Confusing Its Readers About Climate Change?

Andrew Seifter

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The *USA Today* editorial board is well-versed in the science of human-caused climate change and its impacts. So shouldn't *USA Today* make sure that the op-eds it runs alongside its climate-related editorials aren't scientifically inaccurate?

In a recent **study**, we documented that 12 percent of the climate-related opinion pieces that *USA Today* has published since January 2015 contained climate change denial or other climate science misinformation. Most of these opinion pieces were what *USA Today* calls “opposing view” op-eds that ran alongside *USA Today* editorials (“our view”) that accurately reflected climate science.

The end result was **false balance**, where a factually accurate statement about climate change was pitted against a factually inaccurate one, and *USA Today*'s readers were forced to decide which side to believe.

This dynamic was once again at play when *USA Today* published a September 8 “**opposing view**” from Patrick J. Michaels, director of the Cato Institute's Center for the Study of Science. *USA Today* deserves some credit for **properly disclosing** that “Cato has received funding from fossil fuel interests,” but that doesn't excuse publishing an op-ed containing claims about climate change that *USA Today* knows to be untrue.

In the op-ed, Michaels asserted that “glib attributions” of a climate change role in the recent extreme rainfall and flooding in Louisiana are “more wishful than reality.” As purported evidence, he cited a recent **study** of the contiguous United States by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which found that “no evidence was found for changes in extreme precipitation attributable to climate change in the available observed record.” Michaels then added: “What's good for the U.S. is also good for Louisiana.”

The NOAA study Michaels cited did not assess whether the devastating flooding in Louisiana was related to climate change, but another study by many of those same NOAA scientists did. It **found**, “Human-caused climate warming increased the chances of the torrential rains that unleashed devastating floods in south Louisiana in mid August by at least 40 percent.” And the lead author of both studies, Karin van der Wiel, stated: “We found human-caused, heat-trapping greenhouse gases can play a measurable role in events such as the August rains that resulted in such devastating floods, affecting so many people.”

USA Today published Michaels' distortion of NOAA's climate research despite being well aware of the Louisiana-focused study. In its **editorial** that ran alongside Michaels' op-ed, *USA*

Today wrote that the “science of heavy rain events is straightforward” and noted that “a new federal report concluded that human-caused climate change played a ‘measurable’ role in last month’s catastrophic flooding in Louisiana and increases the chances of such torrential downpours by at least 40%.” And a *USA Today* news article **stated** that the NOAA study found climate change “played a major role in the historic rainfall that caused catastrophic flooding in Louisiana last month, nearly doubling the chance of such a deluge taking place.”

Much of the climate science misinformation on the pages of *USA Today* stems from this “**our view**”/“**opposing view**” **format**, but it doesn’t have to be this way. *USA Today* would do a service to its readers by committing to fact-checking all of its climate-related opinion pieces -- “opposing view” or otherwise -- to ensure that they don’t contain false claims about climate science.

The September 8 *USA Today* editorial **concluded**: “There’s plenty of room for debate on the best ways to adapt to climate change, mitigate its effects and curtail greenhouse-gas emissions. After another long, hot, soggy summer, however, neither [GOP presidential candidate Donald] Trump nor any other candidate for public office should be allowed to get away with the argument that climate change is a ‘hoax’ or something not worth sweating over.”

It’s a good point -- and one that should apply to *USA Today*’s opinion pages, too.