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## Patrick McIlheran

# Selling the sizzle, via scriptwriting

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Here's a useful tidbit about that climate-change report out this week, in which your government predicted things will get simply awful:

The report was written by an "expert team" of scientists (it lists 28) "assisted by communications specialists." Among those is the report's sole senior science writer, Susan J. Hassol. Her [Web site](#) describes her as "a climate change communicator." Her degree's in communications. Her prior big gig was writing a bit of agitprop for HBO called "Too Hot Not to Handle," the [DVD of which](#) shows Earth aflame.

That your government would put its science in the hands of an HBO screenwriter, says Patrick J. Michaels, is "further evidence that global warming has progressed from science to theater."

Michaels, whose degree actually *is* in climatology and who taught it for years at the University of Virginia, has been making the case that the matter of global warming has been commandeered by dramatists, especially the political sort. The [feds' report](#) continues that trend, he says.

Take its lead fact about the nation's climate: "U.S. average temperature has risen more than 2°F over the past 50 years." Starting 50 years ago just happens to put you at the depths of a decades-long cooling trend, says Michaels. This exaggerates the subsequent rise to temperatures that only now equal the hot 1930s.

"That's not even close to science," he says. "That's propaganda."

The report's take on climate and crops, his specialty, is "sophomoric," he says, ignoring the range of climates where we now grow food. It ignores reality on heat-wave mortality, "making up a world that doesn't exist. People adapt to climate."

He's got more, as do other climate-scientist critics who argue everything from whether the temperature record measures reality or the growth of hot cities around weather stations (satellite data may suggest the latter) to

whether the feds' report blew off the emerging literature on hurricane mechanics.

Michaels outlined much of this in the book, "[Climate of Extremes](#)," that he wrote with Robert Balling Jr., another professor of climatology rather than screenwriting. The book spends most of its pages laying out others' research, much of it calming, before it makes its main point about exaggeration. That's how science works: You reply to data with newer, better data.

The technique of the federal report, by contrast, is to say that Michaels and those like him are outvoted. "One has to hope it will influence how people think," said top White House science adviser John Holdren, whose [expertise](#), by the by, is plasma physics and arms control. "The timing is important," said Carter Roberts, head of the World Wildlife Fund, because Congress soon will decide whether to make it permanently too expensive to use as much energy as you do now. The report ought to steel lawmakers' resolve, said Roberts, whose degree is in marketing.

This, then, is about branding. Michaels, like others, is branded a "climate change denier," even though he 1) says the Earth is warming 2) because of human activity - just 3) not catastrophically. It's No. 3 that makes him a heretic. Though, as he points out, most of the observed doom data have been coming in on the low end of predictions. This means we needn't panic.

There's a bias toward gloom in climate science, he argues, because of the way it's done. Scientists don't necessarily intend bias, but three forces yield it. Negative results - *not* finding that something warms the earth - aren't news. Scientists, like all of us, see overarching narratives, and right now, the narrative is of a hot Earth. And there's nothing these days like researching climatic doom to keep one's federal grants coming.

But the matter's well past science and into politics. That's why exaggerating science hurts: Exaggeration is being used to stampede us into accepting rules that will eat up [\\$2 trillion](#) of our wealth in six years to reduce the increase in temperatures by [0.2 degree](#) in 2100. We'd do much better by letting people prosper and invent whatever will really reduce carbon.

People sense they're being rushed, says Michaels. Rising numbers - more than half, by some polls - now say climate danger is exaggerated, and warming [ranks low](#) among public worries. As well it might, with North Dakota getting its first [June snow](#) in 60 years, but the more solid reason is déjà vu. People remember how acid rain was going to kill us, says Michaels, if not ozone holes or the population bomb or running out of oil by 1982.

"People remember this stuff," he says. "You can't continue to bludgeon them with apocalyptic rhetoric that each and every time is wrong."

But if you going to try, it helps to have a professional scriptwriter on the job.

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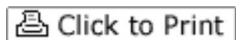
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