



Media Stunner: Atlantic Editor Megan McArdle Admits She's Outsourced Her Thinking to Cato's Pat Michaels

By [Joe Romm](#) on Mar 6, 2012 at 4:46 pm

Megan McArdle, senior editor for *The Atlantic*, has made the most jaw-dropping admission on climate I've seen in years from a journalist. It deserves attention because it unintentionally illuminates why the "status quo" establishment media's coverage of global warming is so fatally useless.

In explaining why she (supposedly) doesn't post a lot on the problem of global warming, McArdle writes:

The first reason I don't post a lot is that I'm not an expert, and I'm not planning to become one. **I've basically outsourced my opinion on the science to people like Jonathan Adler, Ron Bailey, and Pat Michaels of Cato**—all of whom concede that anthropogenic global warming is real, though they may contest the likely extent, or desired remedies.

To paraphrase my mother (and countless others): Megan, if Pat Michaels told you to jump off a cliff, would you? Because that is certainly what he wants humanity to do.

I'll come back to the fact that the Cato Institute, originally the Charles Koch Foundation, is in the process of being officially taken back by the Kochs — and McArdle, in the disclaimer at the end of the piece, notes, the current Charles Koch Foundation "sponsored a journalism fellowship for my husband." Such is the nature of modern-day "journalism."

I'll also come back to the fact that McArdle actually manages to post a whole lot of pieces on climate, document authentication (!) and other subjects she is no expert on.

Here's the folks McArdle has outsourced her thinking on climate **science** to:

- Jonathan Adler is a law professor (who has been funded by the Charles Koch Foundation)
- Ron Bailey is Cato Institute Media Fellow with a penchant for "pulling a Lomborg" — he likes to cite references that say "the opposite of what he implies."
- **Pat Michaels makes crap up on climate for a living and the Cato Institute (and fossil fuel industry) pays him a lot to do so.**

It is almost beyond belief that the senior editor for a major magazine would outsource her thinking on the major issue of our day to a guy like Michaels — and then actually admit it! As *Skeptical Science* has detailed, Patrick Michaels is a "Serial Deleter of Inconvenient Data":

Despite his clear conflict of interest (Michaels has estimated that 40% of his work is funded by the petroleum industry), many people continue to rely on him as a reliable source of climate information. This is an unwise choice, because Michaels also has a long history of badly distorting climate scientists' work. In fact, **not only**

does Michaels misrepresent climate research on a regular basis, but on several occasions he has gone as far as to manipulate other scientists' figures by deleting parts he doesn't like.

As they show in 3 different instance, "Michaels has deleted the data which contradict his constant arguments that the planet will warm less than most climate scientists expect, and thus that global warming is nothing to worry about."

One of those cases is the notorious smear Michaels made against the nation's top climatologist. NASA's [James Hansen](#) said [this](#) about Patrick Michaels' distortion of his work:

"Pat Michaels, has taken the graph from our 1988 paper with simulated global temperatures for scenarios A, B and C, erased the results for scenarios B and C, and shown only the curve for scenario A in public presentations, pretending that it was my prediction for climate change. **Is this treading close to scientific fraud?**"

This fossil-fuel-funded disinformant is the guy McArdle outsourced her thinking on climate science to. You can find many more debunkings of Michaels [online](#) and [here](#).

Just a minute or two Googling would have told McArdle that Michaels is the last person she should outsource her thinking on climate science to.

Whatever happened to the notion of actually talking to recognized experts in the field — say, some of the top 10 climate scientists? They aren't really hard to track down for any serious journalist. But why bother if you're not going to write on the story of the century, unless, of course, you are.

McArdle provides more of her "reasoning":

If they say the planet is warming, then I trust that this is very likely to be true—not just because I like them, but because if you've convinced leading libertarians that humans are contributing to global warming, you've convinced me.

Climate skeptics are going to call this a cop-out and I understand why, but here's the thing....

Actually climate disinformant Steve Milloy has written a post, "[Megan McArdle: Too stupid to opine on global warming](#)," which notes, "what libertarianism has to do with whether greenhouse gases are measurably changing the climate for the worse is anybody's guess." Duh. He of course is annoyed that McArdle supposedly believes in "global warming alarmism."

For Milloy and the denier purists, agreeing with Michaels makes you an alarmist. Seriously! In fact, McArdle is a mostly an anti-alarmist, as we'll see.

Note: I don't think she's stupid. No, this is all [confirmation bias](#) as her startling admission makes clear. She listens only to the people who agree with her, people who not only aren't credible climate experts but indeed who misinform people for a living. I do think the post reveals she doesn't understand this is in fact the story of the century and one she ought to be far better informed on. But again that doesn't make her stupid. It just makes her one of the media herd, the 99% of journalists who just don't get it.

She continues:

... **I cannot be an expert on everything.** I don't know what the speed limit should be, how we should redesign the military to counter 21st century threats, or the best way to allocate scarce water resources between competing claims, even though I recognize that in a modern society, these are all the proper concerns of the government; even though I think that these questions are important, I am willing to leave them to experts on traffic patterns, national defense, and water rights. **So with global warming. Time spent brushing up on the science is time spent not reading up on things where I have greater comparative advantage, like tax policy or the budget.**

Yes, global warming is no different an issue than traffic patterns! The irony that global warming is going to affect scarce water resources and 21st century military threats more than any other single factor is apparently lost on her. She continues:

So I don't blog about the science, because what am I going to say? "This article I don't understand very well sure sounds convincing?" And I don't blog about the economics because they're so damn depressing.

Except that McArdle has blogged on the science and the economics. For instance, she wrote a long piece on a 2010 study I blogged on (see "[Nature Stunner: "Global warming blamed for 40% decline in the ocean's phytoplankton"](#)").

Her headline was, "[Phytoplankton Panic](#)" and not only does she blog on the science (mostly to downplay it), but she also blogs on the economics, which she gets quite wrong (as [TP Green explained at the time](#)). She argues that the claim it will cost 2% of GDP to fix global warming isn't true:

if this is true, 2% of GDP isn't going to cut it. **We'd better get back to an emissions level around 1940, or earlier, and stay there.** Being that we now have about 2.5 times as many people in the country, and the world, as we did then, **that's going to be tricky.**

It is going to be "tricky," but in fact 2% of GDP is really the total shift in investment needed — from dirty, inefficient energy infrastructure to clean, efficient sources. That 2% doesn't actually represent lost GDP, just money spent differently. Multiple independent economic studies make clear that the actual cost is closer to slowing annual global GDP growth by 0.1% — not counting co-benefits (see "[Introduction to climate economics: Why even strong climate action has such a low total cost](#)"). In its definitive 2007 [synthesis report of the literature](#), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded:

In 2050, global average macro-economic costs for mitigation towards stabilisation between 710 and 445ppm CO2-eq are between a 1% gain and 5.5% decrease of global GDP. This corresponds to slowing average annual global GDP growth by less than 0.12 percentage points.

So global GDP drops by under 0.12% per year — **about one tenth of a penny on the dollar** — even in the 445 ppm CO2-eq case (through 2050). And this is for stabilization at 445 ppm CO2-eq, which is **stabilization at 350 ppm CO2** (see Table SPM.6). And that is even deeper than the cuts McArdle worries about (getting emissions back to 1940 levels).

So it turns out McCardle has just enough time to get the same things wrong that Michaels gets wrong, but not enough time to spend getting things right.

The bizarre thing is McCardle asserts that she supports a "hefty" price on carbon, but mostly she does this for the same reason many confusionists do — so she can say she is concerned about an issue that she really isn't while she goes about parroting what Michaels and Cato think on the subject.

Indeed, the headline on this unintentionally revealing post is "Why We Should Act to Stop Global Warming—and Why We Won't."

Except of course it isn't a post about why we should act to stop global warming. It's a collection of Cato-inspired misinformation. She disses the European Emissions Trading System even though it [clearly worked](#). She claims "[it's still having a spot of trouble](#)" but that's a Lomborg-Bailey-esque link to a February article about the fact that "Prices in Europe's cap-and-trade system dropped to a record last month because of oversupply"! The Europeans found it too easy to cut their emissions and then the rest of the world (especially the U.S.) refuses to take action (thanks in part to the efforts of Michaels, Cato and the Kochs) and the price of CO2 drops. This is McArdle's evidence for why the economics of mitigation are "so depressing"!

She writes:

So why do I still support action—especially, climate skeptics demand, when **the science is so uncertain?**

Well, because we've only got (sic) the one climate. I don't like running large one-way experiments on vital systems we don't know how to fix.

The risk of a catastrophic outcome may be small, but it would be pretty darn terrible to find out that hey, we hit the jackpot!

Of course, in some sense, this is a cheap belief, because I don't think that we're going to do anything about it—nay, not even if Megan McArdle spends all her time advocating for such an outcome. The forces arrayed against action are just too powerful—and no, I don't mean the Cato Institute.

What she fails to realize is that the risk of catastrophic outcome isn't small — if we don't act. That's Michaels' and Cato's and the Kochs' disinformation. If we take no action, **the chances of avoiding a catastrophic outcome is small**, as the [recent scientific literature](#) makes painfully clear. She might start by taking a glance at the [definitive NOAA-led report on U.S. climate impacts](#), which warns of scorching 9 to 11°F warming over most of inland U.S. by 2090 with Kansas above 90°F some 120 days a year — and that isn't the worst case, it's business as usual!

I'm glad McArdle admitted it is a "cheap belief" — since in fact she spends all of her time undercutting it. She is certainly right that the forces arrayed against action are powerful — but what a shock that she completely exonerates Cato, the disinformers, and the vast fossil fuel interest arrayed against action, including the Kochs.

Now it seems worth mentioning that for someone who supposedly doesn't have the time to do extended technical analysis on climate, someone who likes to stay in her area of expertise, tax and budget policy, she managed **to find the time to write over 5000 words (!) on a detailed "analysis" of why the Heartland Climate Strategy document leaked by Peter Gleick must be a fake, as Heartland claims**. And people say I write long posts! I challenge anyone to read that whole post and not conclude McArdle doesn't have plenty of time on her hands.

The thing is, McArdle is not known to be an expert on document authentication, a far more specialized area of expertise even than climate science. As an aside, Shawn Otto noted [last week](#) that the deniers urged people to use stylometry and textometry to shed light on the author of that document using a "a well-regarded open source java app called [JGAAP](#)." Otto did so and let's just say the results aren't what McArdle's 5000-word hand-waving analysis shows. Hmm. Maybe she *should* skip all technical analysis.

Relevantly, McArdle has a long discussion of the issue of Heartland funding by the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation. She adds this disclaimer:

Full disclosure: One of the donors in the apparently authenticated documents is Charles Koch, and my husband did a year-long fellowship with the Koch Foundation. However, nothing I'm going to write either defends or indicts Mr. Koch, who's actually pretty incidental to both Heartland's funding, and this story.

But her new post does effectively defend Mr. Koch, somehow failing to mention that, for instance, a 2010 report found [Koch Industries now outspends Exxon Mobil](#) on climate and clean energy disinformation. Or that the Kochs are major owners of Cato! No, no conflict there.

McArdle's final sentence betrays her Cato-esque view of the subject:

No, the debate is about how unpleasant it would be to prevent it—which really isn't much of a debate, either, because the obvious answer is "very, except maybe for DINK urbanites". And that's where the discussion pretty much stalls out.

"Obvious"? Only to those who don't study the issue — or who say they don't have time to study the issue because they're not going to blog on it.

If McArdle in fact spend any time talking to real climate experts rather than posers, she'd know that avoiding global warming is infinitely more pleasant than letting billions suffer.

Her headline is unintentionally revealing. If we don't act to stop global warming, it won't because of what McArdle is trying to say in this piece, that it's too unpleasant, it'll be because of what she actually said in this piece, that media mavens are too lazy to learn the real truth of the high costs of inaction and low costs of action — and because of what she didn't say about the owners of Cato and other fossil fuel companies, who have captured just enough of the political system and the media to block action.