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05.09.2017

## [Worrying Signs of The Times](#) [6]

Consider, if you will, Bret Stephens's inaugural column in *The New York Times*, published on April 28, 2017, under the title "[Climate of Complete Certainty](#) [7]." Owing to Stephens's past misrepresentations of climate change, the column received a lot of scrutiny—provoking "an unusually large outpouring" of letters to the editor, including one from *Merchants of Doubt* coauthor Naomi Oreskes, as well as incisive criticism from [Dana Nuccitelli](#) [8] at *The Guardian*, [Susan Matthews](#) [9] at *Slate*, and [Robert Proctor and Steve Lyons](#) [10] at *Scientific American*.

I'm sure they would not hire a creationist to promote creationism on Op-Ed page, or someone who rejects vaccines, so why is this OK? <https://t.co/ZTMEjPAFHU> [11]

— Naomi Oreskes (@NaomiOreskes) [May 8, 2017](#) [12]

I don't propose to rehash all the detailed criticism of the column here, though they're worth discussion.

Here, I want to ask: when the *Times* hires a columnist with a history of misrepresenting climate science, and when his first column gets simple facts dead wrong, minimizes (as “modest”) the already substantial rise in global temperature, castigates unnamed—and probably mythical—activists for claiming incontestable certainty on the science, and reinforces the archetypical denialist theme of uncertainty throughout, what are the consequence for science teachers?

The *Times* enjoys a generally good reputation for its science reporting overall. Its weekly science section, *Science Times*, was launched in 1978, and quickly became one of the newspaper’s most popular weekly sections. It’s had its ups and downs—it was a disappointment in 2013 when the newspaper disbanded its environmental desk (boo!), but then in 2017 [announced](#) [13] that it was hiring new staff to provide “coverage of the globe’s changing climate and the political, economic, technological and social consequences” (hooray!).

But how many science teachers, seeking to guide their students to credible media sources, will now hesitate to recommend *The New York Times*? Yes, Stephens’s column appeared in the editorial and opinion section of the newspaper, but it’s not good to have to add a caveat to a recommendation (“You can trust the *Times*, except for whatever appears on the next-to-last page of section A”). I’m not sure it’s a distinction everyone would notice anyway. And to get right to the point, I absolutely agree with Naomi Oreskes when she opined, “I’m sure they would not hire a creationist to promote creationism on Op-Ed page, or someone who rejects vaccines, so why is this OK?”

To rub salt into the wound, Stephens’s debut came just weeks after the first wave of teachers received an unsolicited mailing aimed at casting a shadow on the credibility of the scientific consensus on climate change. A booklet entitled *Why Scientists Disagree About Global Warming (sic)* was sent to 25,000 teachers across the country by the Heartland Institute, a conservative and climate-change-denying think tank. The purpose, evidently, was to exploit some combination of ignorance, healthy skepticism, and desire for balanced thinking to get teachers to introduce non-science into their classrooms.



And *The New York Times* was unwittingly implicated. A context-free headline from a 2015 article in the newspaper was reproduced on the envelope, a deliberate attempt to create a sense of credibility before the materials were opened by the recipient. The headline alludes to “Climate Change Lies,” and was doubtless chosen in the hope that teachers will infer that the *Times* was exposing climate change lies peddled by the scientific establishment. In fact, the truth is about the exact opposite. The full headline was “Exxon Mobil Investigated for Possible Climate Change Lies by New York Attorney General.” The associated story discussed ongoing investigations into whether Exxon Mobil deliberately withheld the findings of its own researchers on the reality of climate change to its shareholders. But how many teachers will bother to look up the article? Heartland is hoping not many.

Both Heartland’s propaganda and Stephens’s column have the potential to erode a teacher’s trust in “the paper of record.” And if teachers don’t feel confident turning to the media, where can they go? A

government website? It's a great idea ... or at least it was. Have you visited the EPA's website about climate change lately? Where there was once a rich supply of freely available data and reports, there is now a note that says, "This page is being updated. Thank you for your interest in this topic. We are currently updating our website to reflect the EPA's priorities under the leadership of President Trump and Administrator Pruitt." While some of the former content is currently available on the [January 19 snapshot](#) [14], it is unclear what the future holds.

This all makes for a pretty nasty 1-2-3 punch for teachers in the last month. Climate lies are trying to weasel their way into the science classroom, and once rock-solid sources of climate truth are either getting a little less rock-solid, or disappearing. To say this is not a welcome trend is an understatement. More than ever, we need to stand up for our teachers and students. As Ben Santer said in his recent interview with NCSE (see *RNCSE* 37:2), we must, "keep on holding the powerful accountable, and not letting them get away with this alternate view of reality." So speak up! I know the days are full, the to-do lists endless—especially if you are an educator. But, to paraphrase Ben Santer, there is no point in supporting, teaching, or doing science if you are unwilling to speak out forcefully and publicly when science is being dismissed as worthless.

*Claire Adrian-Tucci, Glenn Branch, and Emily Schoerning all contributed to this post—is it surprising that we all have thoughts and feelings about these developments?*

Are you a teacher and want to tell us about an [amazing free resource](#) [15]? Do you have an idea for a [Misconception Monday](#) [16] or other type of post? Have a [fossil to share](#) [17]? See some good or bad examples of [science communication](#) [18] lately? Drop me an [e-mail](#) [19] or shoot me a Tweet @keeps3.

[+ read](#) [6]

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[7] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/opinion/climate-of-complete-certainty.html>

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[9] [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2017/04/bret\\_stephens\\_first\\_new\\_york\\_times\\_column\\_is\\_classic\\_climate\\_change\\_denialism.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2017/04/bret_stephens_first_new_york_times_column_is_classic_climate_change_denialism.html)

[10] <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/soft-climate-denial-at-the-new-york-times/>

[11] <https://t.co/ZTMEjpAFHU>

[12] <https://twitter.com/NaomiOreskes/status/861396264235171841>

[13] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/jobs/nyt-climate-desk-jobs.html>

[14] [https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/climatechange\\_.html](https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/climatechange_.html)

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