

# Opinion & Analysis

## Media's misplaced 'impartiality' on climate



**JOHN  
GIBBONS**

We live in an age of fomented panic at straw-man scares, whereas the real threat is met with a dithering 'balanced debate'

**T**HE MEDIA is the imperfect lens through which we perceive the world. Witnessing the lengths to which dictators and assorted thugs will go to throttle the free press is a reminder that a society without a vigilant, questioning media is a society without eyes and without ears.

Of course, the media also serves other, less lofty agendas. "The public have an insatiable curiosity to know everything, except what is worth knowing," quipped Oscar Wilde. "Journalism . . . having tradesman-like habits, supplies their demands." The acres of space recently devoted to one domestic tragedy on the Hill of Howth bears out Wilde's observation.

Ireland, by and large, has been served pretty well by its media, at least in the last quarter-century, when it finally began to sometimes challenge, rather than champion, the powerful vested interests that ruled this Republic. One of my favourite clippings is a front-page news piece from the *Evening Herald* in 1954. Headlined "The Pope's restless night", it began: "The Pope passed a restless night, his sleep being interrupted by a slight attack of hiccups." It is of course easy to look back at the cultural mores of half a century ago and wonder how people, including the media, could have been so craven in their pro-establishment sycophancy. In 2010, we couldn't possibly still be that foolish, now could we?

To be fair, the more recent work of

journalists such as Mary Raftery in exposing scandals deserves our praise. But after some notable successes, the media's greatest, and ultimately fatal failure is perhaps only now playing out. And ironically, it's a failure built firmly on one of the very foundations of journalism: the notion of impartiality.

Peter Barron, editor of *Newsnight*, spelled it out clearly in 2007: "It is absolutely not the BBC's job to save the planet. I think there are a lot of people who think that, but it must be stopped." His view was echoed by his colleague Peter Horrocks: "It's not our job to lead people and proselytise about it."

The media has much to say on the subject of climate change, yet remarkably little analysis exists of the media's own performance on this colossally important topic. This information gap is addressed in a new publication from the University of Cardiff, *Climate Change and the Media*, which brings together an international panel of specialists in disciplines from psychology and sociology to climate science. Its conclusions are anything but reassuring.

According to editors, Justin Lewis and Tammy Boyce, the book tries "to shed light on one of the most obstinate displays of inertia in human history, a time when, like latter-day Neros, we fiddle while our planet burns". At the heart of this inertia lies a paradox: we live in a time of media-amplified scare stories, ranging from child abduction to terrorism to MMR. In the midst of these straw men lurks

climate change and the intensifying global sustainability and resource crisis. Yet, the authors repeat, "despite worrying about all kinds of risks that are unlikely to materialise, when faced with one of the most carefully assessed and well-researched threats of recent times, we appear to dither and stall, inching towards half-measures with little sense of urgency".

Things have only gotten worse since the so-called Climategate, a brilliantly executed smear campaign that was sprung to derail the Copenhagen climate summit in December. It worked thanks in no small measure to science-illiterate media gannets hungrily swallowing this red herring whole.

Ireland's most senior climate expert, Prof John Sweeney of NUI Maynooth, acknowledged last week that climate-change deniers were "winning the propaganda war". Chief among them, he added, were deniers

from the ranks of journalism and lobbying.

Hang on a minute, you might ask, aren't journalists supposed to be the good guys, the ones who investigate, not propagate, scams? Well, yes and no. "A media and telecommunications industry fuelled by advertising and profit maximisation is part of the problem," Lewis and Boyce point out.

In Ireland, this even extends to the State broadcaster. The boom years swelled its coffers with an advertising bonanza, and much of this found its way into the pockets, not of lowly researchers, but of elite broadcasters. Millionaire "journalists" have a profound yet undeclared personal vested interest in the consumption-driven economic status quo upon which their wealth is predicated. As, of course, do billionaire media proprietors. They in turn seek out affirmation of their own biases, and ridicule dissenters. These value systems are internalised just as thoroughly as those of the editor 56 years ago and his papal hiccups "scoop".

The next time you hear someone in the media drone on about having a "balanced debate" on climate change, sustainability or resource depletion, keep in mind the wag's definition of a well-balanced Irishman: he's the one with a chip on both shoulders.

This concludes my two-year stint as a weekly *Irish Times* columnist. It's been a privilege, but now it's time to move on. Normal service continues at [www.thinkorswim.ie](http://www.thinkorswim.ie).

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