

Working the fringes: the role of letters to the editor in advancing non-standard media narratives about climate change

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Nathan Young

University of Ottawa, Canada

Abstract

This article examines the role of letters to the editor in advancing and sustaining non-standard narratives about climate change in the print media. The letters page is a unique section of the newspaper that is subject to distinct functional and normative pressures. It is also a place where standard media norms are weakest and non-journalistic narratives have an opportunity to leak in. Using research into climate change coverage in eight major Canadian dailies in 2007–2008, the article employs content analysis and critical discourse analysis to examine how letters advance fringe arguments into the print media landscape that would not stand up to regular journalistic scrutiny. While these arguments come from all sides of the issue, it is argued that letters are particularly important for establishing and legitimizing conservative-skeptical perspectives on climate change.

Keywords

climate change, communication, discourse, media, public sphere

1. Introduction

Global climate change is unlike any other scientific and environmental issue. It is extraordinarily complex, in terms of both its physical manifestations and its emerging status as a worldwide cultural and political touchstone. As several prominent social theorists have recently argued, ideas about climate change and its intersections with economy, morality, and risk are potentially transformative and represent one of the most serious challenges yet to global capitalism as currently practiced (Beck, 2009; Giddens, 2009; Hulme, 2009). It also remains highly contested, despite the overwhelming consensus among climate scientists represented in the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Conservative “skeptical” narratives have

Corresponding author:

Nathan Young, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier Ave. East, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6N5

Email: Nathan.Young@uottawa.ca

demonstrated remarkable staying power, particularly in the English-speaking world, and remain a considerable wildcard in public understanding and political action on the issue (Jacques et al., 2008; McCright and Dunlap, 2010).

All of this makes climate change a major challenge for media organizations looking to responsibly report and communicate these issues. Existing research has shown that both television and print news media have a mixed record in this regard. While news organizations on the whole have been open to climate change as a newsworthy topic (particularly in recent years), several influential studies have pointed to the role of journalistic norms and constraints in influencing the presentation of climate change issues (Anderson, 2009). For instance, Boykoff and Boykoff (2004, 2007) have argued that the norms of objectivity and balance that are critical to fair reporting have, in this case, maintained the illusion of scientific uncertainty and disagreement by giving equal voice to minority viewpoints. In another vein, Carvalho (2007: 223) argues that the complexity of the climate change issue means it is particularly vulnerable to “entanglements with the ideological standpoints” of reporters, editors, and newspapers as they interpret and “reconstruct” scientific and political claims for consumption by the general public.

This article accepts that norms about news-making are important, but argues that letters to the editor, which operate under a distinct set of normative and functional rules, also play a significant role in the reconstruction of climate change issues for public consumption. There is notably little research on the role played by letters to the editor in establishing broader media narratives (e.g., Pritchard and Berkowitz, 1991; Raeymaeckers, 2005). Drawing on research into climate change coverage in eight major Canadian daily newspapers in 2007–2008, I argue that letters to the editor advance very different themes, narratives, and logics about climate change than are found in other reporting (news articles, features, and even other opinion-page content such as editorials and columns). Provocatively, letters appear to be means of inserting otherwise taboo, unacceptable, unproven (and unprovable) arguments into the mass media landscape. These non-standard arguments come from all sides of the issue, but, proportionately speaking, are particularly important for establishing and legitimizing conservative-skeptical perspectives on climate change.

2. Why letters to the editor matter

Climate change breaks expected patterns in media coverage of environmental issues. Most research on the intersection of media and environment suggests that news organizations have great difficulty with “creeping” environmental problems that are not regularly sustained by dramatic events (Boykoff, 2007: 485; Einsiedel and Coughlan, 1993; Hannigan, 2006). When the climate change story originally broke into the media sphere in the mid-1980s, most coverage focused on explaining the issue to audiences, detailing potential impacts, making links to weather events, and discussing potential policy responses (Ungar, 1992; Wilkins, 1993; Young and Dugas, 2011). Eventually, however, the lack of real-world events clearly attributable to climate change led to a decline in coverage, leading some observers in the early and mid-1990s to conclude that climate change issues were following the typical issue-attention cycle described by Downs (1972), or alternatively using Hilgartner and Bosk’s (1988) public arenas model to argue that climate change did not have the requisite staying power in the public imagination and was being outcompeted by other issues and problems (see Ungar, 1992; Trumbo, 1996; McComas and Shanahan, 1999).

We know now of course that climate change subsequently broke into the media mainstream in a big way to become the most widely covered and sustained environmental story ever witnessed. There are many reasons for this breakthrough, including developments such as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 (Rio Summit) and the Kyoto Protocol in

1997 that bridged the issue into the inexhaustible news worlds of politics and business. However, the media success of climate change is also due in large part to its metamorphosis into a flexible metaphor or shorthand for other issues (Hulme, 2009). For instance, Young and Dugas (2011: 5) found that climate change is frequently evoked in the media out of context, as a means of “telling other stories” about business ingenuity, political conflict, and cultural and celebrity news (see also Boykoff and Goodman, 2009). This suggests that as climate change has moved into the mainstream, it has become “banalized,” with the more radical themes of crisis, transformation, and impacts that dominated early coverage giving way to more routinized treatment that uses global warming as a narrative vehicle as much as an object of analysis and comment (see Trumbo, 1996; Young and Dugas, 2011).

Letters to the editor are different. First, the letters section is an opportunity for non-professional writers to express arguments on newsworthy topics. Indeed, much of the current literature on letters to the editor within media studies focuses on how well letters reflect the ideal of public participation in debates about current affairs and the potential of this forum for a more deliberative form of democracy (e.g., Wahl-Jorgenson, 2001; Nip, 2006). Reader letters are among the most popular sections of any newspaper (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2002a: 69). Moreover, while nearly every news daily now has a website that allows readers to post free-ranging online “comments” on its stories, published letters to the editor still have significant cachet, allowing writers to reach a wider audience and attain the legitimacy of editorial approval for their arguments (Nip, 2006: 219). In short, letters are an important way for outside voices to formally participate in the narration of mass media stories.

Second, existing research suggests that letters to the editor are shaped by a unique set of *functional* and *structural-normative* pressures that are felt by both letter writers and editorial staff tasked with choosing and modifying letters for publication. For writers, the primary function of a letter is to have it published, which means that writers must address and convince two (unknown) audiences who approach the text differently: the editorial staff who can publish only a fraction of letters received daily, and the general public who will receive and evaluate the claims made (Lambiase, 2005). For editors, the primary function of letters is to “market the product,” in terms of both ensuring the ongoing relevance of the letters page within the newspaper and, ideally, enhancing overall circulation or attracting attention to the organization’s website (Raeymaeckers, 2005: 218). According to fieldwork by Raeymaeckers (2005), this often leads editors to insert controversial statements and clauses into letters, to give letters incendiary titles, and to group letters together in “for and against” sets even when they are only dubiously connected.

Editors and writers also face structural and normative constraints. Ethnographic research has shown that editors select letters based on a range of practical and evaluative criteria. Wahl-Jorgenson (2001, 2002a) found that editors use four rules to judge incoming letters: brevity, relevance, entertainment, and authority. The rule of brevity reflects limitations of column space for letters, but in practice it means that successful letters tend to be direct, to the point, and employ a primarily argumentative style (see also Atkin and Richardson, 2007). The rule of relevance means that letters ought to respond to current events or recent newspaper content, which makes it difficult for writers to introduce topics into the public sphere this way. The rule of entertainment tends to privilege letters that are emotional, ironic, over-the-top, or “from the heart” (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2001: 315). Finally, incoming letters are evaluated based on their authority, which is judged by examining the cultural capital of writers as expressed through style, language, and credentials. In combination, these normative expectations mean that “the ideal contributor to the letters page is the informed outsider who knows how to write well” (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2002a: 77), and who “introduces new arguments . . . [but] not new topics” into the media discourse (Raeymaeckers, 2005: 201).

Letters to the editor should therefore be considered as a type of hybrid forum that is shaped by a set of rules and guidelines that is distinct within the news media. The strong role that editors play in selecting and rewriting letters means that this section is not a “free space” or in any way reflective of broad public opinion (cf. Hill, 1981). Rather, what appears in the letters section is a “constructed public” that is assembled using raw materials provided by non-journalists but molded by editorial staff who are responding to internal norms and pressures. This does not mean, however, that writers’ voices are lost. Among the most significant findings from Wahl-Jorgenson’s (2002a, 2002b) ethnographies is that the functional and structural-normative pressures described above are frequently powerful enough to override editors’ judgment and preferences. Letters are often received that make editors uncomfortable or angry, but “[the writers] know the rules, they write under 200 words, so they get published” (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2002b: 196). All of this means that letters are unique in the news media landscape – sites of unpredictability where standard media norms are weakest and non-journalistic narratives have an opportunity to leak in. While this uniqueness has led several researchers to exclude letters from their analysis of coverage of climate change issues (e.g., Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004; Carvalho, 2007), I argue that this distinctiveness is critical to understanding how non-standard arguments about climate change enter the mass media universe and, by consequence, earn a measure of legitimacy as editorially “vetted” claims.

3. The study

The analysis presented below is based on a study of climate change coverage in Canada. Canada is an important nation in global climate change politics. While Canada has signed and ratified the Kyoto Protocol, which legally binds countries to defined reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, the current Conservative Party government has publicly abandoned any hope of meeting these targets. More significantly, Canada has actively lobbied against further coordinated global action on climate change, and was named Fossil of the Year by the International Climate Action Network following its obstructionist stance at the Copenhagen Conference of Parties meeting in 2009.

The study involves analysis of climate change coverage in eight major Canadian newspapers, six published in English (*The Calgary Herald*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *The New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Vancouver Sun*) and two in French (*Le Devoir*, *La Presse*). Newspapers were selected with an eye to regional representation, circulation, and influence (so-called “newspapers of record”), although these criteria were constrained by the availability of electronic records.¹ The sample includes newspapers with a reputation for political conservatism (*National Post*, *Calgary Herald*) and political liberalism (*Toronto Star*, *Le Devoir*), with the remainder being more or less centrist. Each newspaper was examined across the twelve month period of October, 2007 to October, 2008. This was a time of relatively high climate change coverage, coinciding with the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Al Gore and members of the IPCC, and the 2008 Canadian federal election which was fought in part over climate change issues.

Individual media items were selected using an electronic database (ProQuest) and the keywords “climate change” OR “global warming” OR “greenhouse effect” OR “greenhouse gas.”² Each item was then read in order to exclude those that made only passing reference to climate change issues, leaving a total of 2,249 items. Content analysis was used to identify denotative content such as use of voice (quotation and paraphrasing of sources), claims (regarding risks and benefits, impacts, motives, blame), narrative devices (metaphors, parallels), and issue frames (such as natural rights, justice/equity, economic growth, and green capitalism). Coding was performed by two research assistants. Intercoder reliability was tested using a Cohen’s kappa test on a subset of 100 articles,

yielding an overall mean coefficient of 0.71, which is considered high for this conservative test (Lombard et al., 2002: 593). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was also used on a selection of items to examine style, argumentation, and latent content. CDA looks at language use within its broader social context – it “seeks to draw out the form and function of the text, the way that this text relates to the way it is produced and consumed, and the relations of this to the wider society in which it takes place” (Richardson, 2007: 37; Fairclough, 1995a). The content analysis provides the primary basis for analyzing structural and thematic differences between letters and other types of articles, while CDA is used to examine how letters draw on broader social and cultural themes to construct and present arguments about climate change.

4. Findings

Content analysis

I will begin by discussing findings from the content analysis phase of the research. As mentioned, content analysis is useful for making broad comparisons across different types of media items. Table 1 provides basic information about the volume and type of media coverage dedicated to climate change during the study period. Overall, coverage of climate change issues is high in both the national media (*Globe and Mail* and *National Post*) and the regional newspapers. Climate change is also a frequent subject of editorials and columns – occasionally rivaling the number of news articles. Letters to the editor are more uneven, but are notably less frequent in the French language media. These newspapers publish in the province of Quebec, where support for climate change mitigation is the strongest in Canada (Ekos Research Associates, 2005). Journalistic traditions are also modestly different in Quebec, which is influenced by the Continental French model of “commentary journalism” that gives reporters more latitude to include interpretation in their stories (Young and Dugas, forthcoming). These factors may be combining to make climate change less controversial for letter-writing audiences and less of a hot button issue for letter-page editors.

Table 2 outlines the frequency of different news pegs used to tell climate change stories. Literature on newsroom culture and media practices shows that potential topics exist in a competitive environment, and that stories rarely appear without a “peg” or an anchor to an event or broader news theme (Gans, 1979: 168). This is particularly important in environmental reporting,

Table 1. Type of items by publication, 2007–2008

	News article	Editorial/column	Feature or information series	Letter to the editor	Total
<i>Calgary Herald</i>	164	26	12	38	240
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	198	90	37	46	371
<i>Le Devoir</i>	152	37	14	1	204
<i>La Presse</i>	141	67	27	5	240
<i>National Post</i>	103	118	14	55	290
<i>New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal</i>	117	53	0	16	186
<i>Toronto Star</i>	167	150	6	49	372
<i>Vancouver Sun</i>	196	106	7	37	346
Total	1238	647	117	247	2249

Table 2. News pegs used by type of item (ratios)

	News article	Editorial/column	Feature or information series	Letter to the editor
Scientific claim, discovery, or publication**	0.25	0.07	0.08	0.41
Occurrence in natural world	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01
Political event**	0.36	0.23	0.13	0.08
Conflict among experts	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
Suggested remedy**	0.19	0.22	0.21	0.05
Other**	0.15	0.18	0.34	0.04
Does not apply**	0.02	0.28	0.21	0.40

**Variance is significant to < .01 (ANOVA comparison of means).

given the slow-developing nature of many environmental problems (Greenberg et al., 1989: 120). Here, we begin to get a sense of the thematic uniqueness of letters to the editor compared to other formats. First, a large number of letters appear without an identifiable peg. This suggests that Wahl-Jorgenson's (2002a) norm of "relevance" – where a letter that refers to an event or current affairs has a better chance of being published – is flexible in the case of climate change. Second, by far the most frequent peg used in letters is a scientific claim, discovery, or publication – a peg that is also commonly used for news items but not editorials or features (which are defined as special in-depth or investigative reports that are not beholden to the daily news cycle). Other major news pegs, notably political events and suggested remedies, are rarely used in letters. Overall, this points to a strong preoccupation with scientific issues in reader letters but in a way that does not encompass discussions of potential remedies or solutions, nor the "experts in conflict" trope that is common in US media (Boykoff, 2007) but is rarely used in other media cultures (Olausson, 2009; Antilla, 2010).

The overall balance of the items is considered in Table 3. Articles were coded according to whether or not they privilege a particular position or perspective on climate change, for instance by presenting certain claims uncontested or by stating outright that one position is correct and the other incorrect or faulty. Overall, the proportion of items that seek to provide "equal consideration" to consensus and skeptical claims is quite low (around 1%). Again, this contrasts with American findings (Boykoff, 2007), but is consistent with international research showing that, in recent years at least, journalists have moved beyond the "point-counterpoint" format when covering climate change issues (Smith and Joffe, 2009; Antilla, 2010). This does not necessarily signal agreement, but that staged "debates" on climate change issues are now rarely used. Table 3 also shows that the proportion of letters that explicitly privilege consensus claims (that climate change is occurring and is primarily caused by human activities) is similar to that of editorials (18% and 17%, respectively), and is notably higher than that of regular news items (11%). However, letters are by far the most likely format to privilege "skeptical" claims (15%) compared to editorials (5%) and news items (1%). This finding suggests that letters are one of the key ways that more conservative narratives sustain themselves in the mass media.

Table 4 compares the thematic content of letters to other types of coverage. Intriguingly, the predominant finding here is that letters to the editor are *not* concerned with the main issues, themes,

Table 3. Balance of media items (ratios)

	News article	Editorial/column	Feature or information series	Letter to the editor
Privileges consensus claims**	0.11	0.17	0.24	0.18
Equal consideration	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01
Privileges “skeptical” claims**	0.01	0.05	0.07	0.15
Not discernable/not relevant**	0.88	0.77	0.69	0.67

**Variance is significant to $< .01$ (ANOVA comparison of means).

and arguments that dominate coverage in news items, editorials, and features. For instance, letters to the editor mention ecological, economic, health, and social/cultural issues related to climate change far less frequently than do other types of article. This pattern holds even when looking at more specific dimensions of these issues. Only 9% of letters mentioned an ecological risk or harm from climate change (such as flooding, drought, severe weather, etc.) compared to 18% of news items, 15% of editorials, and 23% of features ($p < .01$). As argued by Smith and Joffe (2009: 652), discussions of impacts are an important way to establish “pro-consensus” narratives about climate change. Equally significant, only 8% of letters in our sample mentioned an economic risk or harm from attempts to mitigate climate change, which is a core conservative narrative against strong climate change policy, compared to 16% of news items, 23% of editorials, and 17% of features ($p < .01$). As we will see in the section on CDA below, however, this does not mean that pro-consensus and conservative narratives are absent from letters (quite the opposite), but that they are articulated differently than in other parts of the newspaper – using language that goes beyond standard discussions of impacts or the economic consequences of mitigation.

Items were also coded to capture the appearance of frames. Frames are strategic narrative devices that provide readers with an “interpretive package” for understanding an issue (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989: 1). According to Entman (1993: 52), frames are highly effective narrative tools because they bundle factual, moral, and prescriptive arguments into a coherent ready-made interpretation of the issue at hand. Frames were coded based on their underlying argument rather than their topic. For instance, while the economic growth frame and the green capitalism frame both have business issues as their key topic, the former makes a more conservative argument about the primacy of economic growth at all costs, while the latter is a more progressive narrative about private sector reforms and profit-making in response to climate change or climate change policy. Again, the major frames that dominate coverage in news, editorials, and features are either less evident or nearly absent from letters to the editor. For example, the economic growth frame is often used in climate change coverage to set up classic “economy versus environment” narratives and/or to argue against aggressive mitigation policies (Young and Dugas, 2011: 15–16). This narrative is particularly popular in editorials and features (29% and 21%), but appears in only 7% of letters. The most common frame to appear in letters – that of green capitalism – still appears far less frequently than in other media items. In fact, the only frame that appears more frequently in letters than news items is generational rights, or the idea that climate change violates obligations to children or future citizens.

Table 4 also provides information regarding the appearance of specific claims and arguments. Here, we see that letters do not differ substantially from other media items in claims about

Table 4. Appearance of select issues, frames and claims (ratios)

		News article	Editorial/column	Feature or information series	Letter to the editor
Issues	Mention of ecological issues**	0.37	0.36	0.59	0.22
	Mention of economic issues**	0.30	0.39	0.38	0.14
	Mention of health issues**	0.05	0.08	0.10	0.03
	Mention of social/cultural issues**	0.10	0.14	0.18	0.06
Frames	Economic growth frame**	0.16	0.29	0.21	0.07
	Green capitalism frame**	0.45	0.46	0.51	0.20
	Justice and equity frame	0.05	0.07	0.05	0.04
	Generational rights frame**	0.02	0.07	0.04	0.07
	Nature-having-rights frame	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01
	Political conflict frame**	0.12	0.09	0.04	0.02
Arguments and claims	Assertion of scientific consensus	0.04	0.05	0.08	0.05
	Assertion of scientific uncertainty**	0.02	0.09	0.11	0.07
	Denial of reality of climate change**	0.01	0.05	0.04	0.13
	Attribution of blame for climate change**	0.16	0.21	0.12	0.19
	Accusation of bias**	0.19	0.42	0.22	0.49
	Call for government intervention**	0.11	0.12	0.13	0.04
	Narrative complexity index score**	2.70	3.54	3.59	2.19

**Variance is significant to < .01 (ANOVA comparison of means).

scientific consensus or uncertainty. However, they do contain significantly more assertions of *outright denial* that climate change is occurring or that human activities are to blame (appearing in 13% of letters, compared to 1% of news items and 5% of editorials). While denial is a fringe argument in regular reporting and even editorials, it appears with notable frequency in letters. It is also noteworthy that letters are a frequent platform for accusations of bias (49% of all letters accuse some person, group, or perspective as having an ulterior or hidden motive behind their claims or actions). As we will see in the discourse analysis below, many of these accusations are aggressive and produced with minimal, if any, proofs.

Finally, Table 4 presents findings from a “narrative complexity index” that was constructed by summing and then averaging all possible content codes relating to issues, frames, and claims. In

short, this index provides a rough measure of the thematic richness of typical climate change coverage. Letters score significantly lower on the index than other types of item. This pattern holds even when controlling for word count, given that letters tend to be shorter than other items.³ This is consistent with the earlier discussion of normative pressures for letters to “be direct” and punchy, but also suggests that letters are the least nuanced contributors to climate change coverage.

Overall, these findings show that letters occupy a different thematic space than other types of media item with respect to climate change issues. The strongest pattern to emerge from the content analysis is that letters *are not addressing the mainstream issues and themes that preoccupy news reporting, editorials, and features*. As mentioned earlier, political and business themes have increasingly dominated climate coverage as the issue has matured (Trumbo, 1996; Boykoff, 2009; Olausson, 2009; Young and Dugas, 2011). Letters, however, rarely address these, except through accusations of bias, as we will see below. Instead, letters focus more on issues surrounding science, although in a way that ignores or plays down “second-order” scientific and expert issues such as ecological and economic impacts, and suggested remedies.

The distinctiveness of letters is perhaps best illustrated by comparing them to editorials, which are also meant to be argumentative and provocative. Editorials are pegged far more frequently to political events and less frequently to scientific claims. Moreover, despite their reputation for boundary-pushing and challenging conventional wisdom, editorials are much less inclined than letters to trumpet conservative-skeptical claims or deny the reality of anthropogenic climate change. With one exception (accusations of bias) editorials are in fact thematically closer to standard news items than letters. This suggests that letters, more than any other vehicle, are the means by which unusual or non-standard arguments about climate change enter the print media landscape. Next, I look at how these arguments are assembled and presented to readers.

Critical discourse analysis

CDA is a way of looking at language as it intersects and interacts with its broader social and political context (Fairclough, 1995a). It pays attention to the “situated meanings” of words and arguments (Gee, 2011: 153), and assumes that audiences play a significant role in filling in the contextual blanks around language and claims – meaning that texts can evoke events, and power relations, and meanings without explicitly raising them. As Richardson (2007: 38) argues, CDA “assumes that every aspect of textual content is the result of a choice – the choice to use one way of describing a person, an action or a process over another; the choice to use one way of constructing a sentence over another.” In the case of letters, these choices are made by multiple people: the letter writer(s) themselves, and the editorial staff who frequently shorten texts, correct grammar, and even insert clauses and arguments (Raeymaeckers, 2005: 215). As argued earlier, this co-construction is governed by functional and normative constraints that can alter the intended meanings of writers and contradict the personal preferences of editors. CDA looks at how these choices are expressed and how they fit into the broader debates and political-economic realities that “surround the communicative event” (Fairclough, 1995b: 57).

The six letters chosen for analysis below are meant to be illustrative rather than exceptional. While they are not “average” (which would be difficult to assess, given the number and range of letters), they are not atypical or outliers. The letters discussed do, however, contain arguments for or against action on climate change issues. Not all letters in the sample do this, and several types of letter are not represented in the CDA, including: letters whose content is limited to objecting to a point of fact in a prior article or editorial, those that make apolitical jokes or puns, and letters attributed to organizations.

The first letter examined here (Letter 1) shows how science-based claims are woven together with direct and indirect accusations of bias. In this respect, it reflects some of the more common themes revealed by the content analysis.

Letter 1: "Money grab," Calgary Herald, March 16, 2008

Pat Madsen's letter contrasting the pollution in India to the clean air here is spot on. The government of Canada seems determined to bring industry to a grinding halt over a false premise. CO₂ is not a pollutant and does not cause global warming. The sun does.

Trouble is, our air and water are generally so clean that environmentalists like David Suzuki will themselves be out of work unless they come up with the next villain. That villain is man-made global warming and they have successfully swindled the common person into believing their nonsense.

It is a very dangerous proposition when the government starts legislating based on theory rather than fact.

Enough, already.

Letter 1 draws on two popular conservative-skeptical narratives: that carbon dioxide is not a pollutant but a molecule essential to life on Earth, and that solar cycles or activity are responsible for historical and recent temperature fluctuations (Solomon, 2008). The letter also directly accuses environmentalists, personified by David Suzuki, one of Canada's leading public environmental activists, of being motivated by potential lack of "work" – which could imply financial gain but also fame and celebrity – and as willfully ignorant of "facts" that are presumably possessed by the author. These first-order themes are underscored by at least two others. The first is anti-elitism or anti-intellectualism, as seen in the reference to "the common person," environmentalists' "nonsense," and the populist statement "enough, already." The second is criminality or depravity, which is evoked in the use of the words "villain," "swindle," "very dangerous," and "proposition" (an odd choice when "prospect" seems more accurate in this context). The title "Money grab" is also notable, as it was likely chosen by editorial staff and makes no direct reference to the content of the letter.

Letter 2 touches on many of the same themes, although it is somewhat unusual in that it is pegged to a suggested remedy (a carbon tax implemented in the province of British Columbia).

Letter 2: "Carbon taxes one more way to whack taxpayer," Vancouver Sun, February 11, 2008

Taxing carbon dioxide is a stupid idea. It will do absolutely nothing to reduce global levels of greenhouse gasses. India, China and other industrialized nations will continue to pump copious amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which will make any reductions here in British Columbia seem like a drop in the ocean.

The proponents of this tax argue that the revenues would go to technologies that would counter our reliance on fossil fuels. This means that our hard-earned money will go towards pie-in-the-sky schemes of well-connected, over-educated profiteers who all sing from the same choir [*sic*] of global warming alarmists. The complete waste of millions and millions of tax dollars on the hydrogen fuel cell is a case in point.

We are creating a monster here, first because of the costly bureaucratic structures we will have to put in place to monitor the funds and, second, we will create new industries that rely on

government handouts. Believe me when I say that any viable technologies will stand alone without gravy-train subsidies.

The more we feed this monster with money, the more we will hear the shrill cry of vested interests telling us how desperate a state our planet is in.

First, anti-intellectualism is again an evident theme here, as it is in many letters critical of ideas or actions on anthropogenic climate change. Second, Letter 2 presents a common populist interpretation of political economy, with the writer evoking imagery of both monopoly capitalism (profiteers) and central planning (gravy-train subsidies, government handouts, vested interests) acting against the interests of hard-working people. Third, Letter 2 illustrates the common use of fatalism within letters that argue against climate change action. As noted by Richardson (2001: 146), letters to the editor frequently seek to “construct common sense” by appealing to (perceived) universals among the reading audience (see also Gee, 2011: 170). In this case, the writer begins with the dismissal of mitigation efforts using what appears to be logic-based argument (emissions reductions in one jurisdiction will not guarantee overall reductions), but the remainder of the text recasts this argument according to ideas about fairness, hard work, and the victimization of British Columbian taxpayers by Canadian elites. Together, these narratives create a broader story about powerlessness in the face of big environmental changes and political forces, albeit one that is decidedly conservative rather than activist. The logical disjuncture between the two main arguments is not unusual. Research by Atkin and Richardson (2007: 1) has shown that letters to the editor rarely follow the standard patterns of “argumentative reasonableness” identified by linguists and rhetoricians. Rather than pursuing a style that would “optimize argument resolution” (Atkin and Richardson, 2007: 5), many letters take (often extreme) shortcuts in the arguments presented in order to advance multi-dimensional appeals to common sense.

Importantly, constructions of common sense can also be intentionally illogical. Letters frequently attempt to connect with audiences using overly simple language, sarcasm, evident exaggeration, and *ad hominem* attacks, as are evident in Letters 3 and 4 below.

Letter 3: “Canada’s cold on warming,” Toronto Star, December 18, 2007

I finally figured out what global warming is. It’s when you spend millions of dollars to send your laziest people, from around the globe, to a warm place like Bali so they can figure out ways to spend billions of dollars on something that doesn’t exist, while you freeze your behind off.

Stupid me. I thought it was that warm feeling you get from shovelling two feet of snow.

Letter 4: “Climate Unmentionables,” Globe and Mail, December 6, 2007

Few deny global warming is an important issue but the peachiness [*sic*] and hypocrisy of many in the environmental movement is a bit rich.

When these folks give up their air conditioners, cars, BlackBerrys, cell phones and oversized homes, we can take them more seriously.

These arguments are not intended to be constructive. While they are consistent with Wahl-Jorgenson’s (2002a) norm of entertainment, the language used is strongly aggressive (laziest, hypocrisy) and invites readers to join the letter writers in holding whole categories of people in contempt.

The emerging picture of letters to the editor is that they not only are thematically distinct from other media items, but advance arguments and narratives that would be impossible to sustain in

other sections of the newspaper. They are a vehicle for introducing the “unprovable” into the climate change discussion, particularly in how they make connections across disparate climate change issues, and how they treat the motives of key individuals and groups. The kinds of unsubstantiated accusations and disparaging tones that appear in letters are simply unacceptable in “normal” reporting governed by norms of balance and objectivity (Harrison, 2006: 144). They are arguments that can only be articulated by outsiders. These languages and logics are, however, at least partially legitimized when they appear in print – having survived editorial review, they become sanctioned as being within “the boundaries of legitimate or fair comment” (Allan, 1999: 93).

While the letters discussed thus far have a distinct conservative-skeptical angle, many of the same themes and logics appear in those that support strong mitigative action. For instance, Letter 5 below makes a common-sense appeal to readers through the prism of nationalism, coupled with the now-familiar theme of speculation about motives:

Letter 5: “Where’s the leadership?” Toronto Star, July 9, 2008

The picture of [Prime Minister] Stephen Harper beaming at George W. Bush [at the G8 meeting] calls for a caption such as, “You’re such a great guy, Mr. President. If we could, we would turn all of northern Alberta into one huge oil field, just to keep you happy.”

The photo is also a study in lapel pins. Bush is wearing his American flag pin, fitting for a man whose decisions will always be determined by what is in his country’s narrowly defined best interest. Harper is not wearing a Canadian flag pin and his G8 pin is worn on a slant that makes it look like a falling bomb.

Harper is now being “credited” with obstructing progress on a number of global initiatives, such as the world food shortage, climate change and aid to Africa, all in the name of what he sees as his country’s narrowly defined best interest, which, in Harper’s case, is always measured in terms of what makes for the best economics. Maybe it’s just as well he left his flag pin at home. He doesn’t make many Canadians feel proud of our current role in the world as drillers of oil and endorsers of slaughter.

Letter 5 is also notable for its association of climate change with violence. References to US oil demand, “a falling bomb,” and “endorsers of slaughter” are presumably intended to evoke the Iraq War, in which Canada did not participate. The writer’s imagined “caption” also plays on long-standing Canadian worries about political and economic subservience to the United States. These implied links between climate change, nationalism, and violence are another example of shortcuts that violate standards of “argumentative reasonableness” discussed above (Atkin and Richardson, 2007). They are implied rather than explained, and rely on an emotive response from readers to fill in the blanks.

Finally, Letter 6 also makes connections between climate change, nationalism, and violence, this time through the racially-charged notion of “climate apartheid”:

Letter 6: “Combating climate change requires a how-to attitude,” Vancouver Sun, January 7, 2008

A person of no less stature than South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, well-versed in the ways of apartheid, has spoken of a new type of “separateness” – climate apartheid. The people who will be most impacted by this scourge brought about by the fossil fuel energized development of the industrialized world are the poorest and darkest-skinned. That’s one of the reasons it’s so shameful that Canada, which in the 1980s assumed a leading role in forcing economic sanctions against South Africa because of its practice of apartheid, is now itself practicing climate apartheid. The Canadian government is seen as a pariah in the efforts to fight climate change.

This letter is notable in several respects. First, it illustrates the often underappreciated role that religion and religious imagery play in climate change narratives (Hulme, 2009: 144), not only in the mention of Archbishop Tutu but in the use of terms such as “scourge,” “shameful,” and “pariah.” This is a key way for morally-charged imagery and language to enter the media discussion. Second, it is an example of how letters introduce unusual or non-mainstream ideas into the newspaper. Climate apartheid is a troubling notion that has recently gained traction on activist websites. The term appears in two letters in the sample, but not in any articles, editorials, or features. It is either uninteresting or too extreme an idea to appear in the other sections of the newspaper. Third, the letter illustrates the different editorial treatment received by texts on opposite sides of the issue. The titles given to Letters 5 and 6 are substantially more moderate than the actual texts; and this contrasts strongly with the inflammatory captions given to the conservative-skeptical Letters 1–4 discussed above. It is unclear why this is happening. On the one hand, editors may have more reason to push conservative-skeptical claims further to the right. These letters are by nature iconoclastic (being against a consensus position), and the inflammatory titles may heighten entertainment value. On the other hand, the different treatment may simply be due to the fact that creating captions for conservative-populist narratives is easier than for letters that raise uncomfortable and serious topics such as violence and racism.

5. Discussion

Findings from both the content analysis and CDA suggest that letters to the editor make a unique contribution to print media narratives about climate change. Generally speaking, letters ignore the major themes and arguments that preoccupy news articles, editorials, and features. As the climate change issue has matured, the latter have come to focus predominantly on how global warming intersects with political and business issues. These discussions tend to center on political conflicts, prospects for green capitalism, suggested remedies, and competing ecological and economic priorities. As mentioned earlier, this mainstreaming of climate change coverage has also made it less radical and more banal, as climate change itself has become a metaphor or trope in run-of-the-mill discussions of political posturing and business strategy (Young and Dugas, 2011).

Letters, as we have seen, are not banal. The limited research that has been conducted on letters to the editor to date suggests that they exist in a unique functional and normative environment. Letter writers are not professional journalists, which means that their styles of writing and argument differ from those found in other sections of the newspaper. At the same time, however, letter-writing is competitive and heavily mediated by editorial staff who have internal criteria for the selection and modification of letters, most notably the norms of brevity, relevance, entertainment and authority (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2002a). In the case of climate change, these norms allow climate change to be “covered” rather differently in letters, focusing on different issues and advancing distinctly non-standard narratives.

First, letters predominantly focus on issues related to science and knowledge. While mainstream media coverage has moved away from scientific issues and debates, letters are keeping the illusion of scientific discord alive. As illustrated by Letters 1 and 3 above, the decades-long work of the thousands of scientists involved in the IPCC can be dismissed with astonishing ease (“CO₂ . . . does not cause global warming, the sun does”; “global warming is . . . something that doesn’t exist”). Going beyond these specific claims, several studies of media coverage of environmental issues (including climate change) have noted how extended discussions of science can paradoxically be used to establish larger narratives of uncertainty (e.g., Zehr, 2000; Demeritt, 2006). Essentially, when coverage dwells on scientific claims, it frequently gives readers the impression

that the issue is still in its formative stages – not well understood, requiring further research, far from consensus. While both conservative-skeptical and pro-consensus letter writers use scientific claims to support their arguments, the continued focus on scientific disagreements clearly favors the skeptical agenda. Letters become an important way of keeping these claims alive in a mass media environment that has largely moved on.

Second, letters advance arguments and narratives from all sides of the conflict that are outside the boundaries of mainstream reporting. With the notable exception of accusations of bias, which also appear frequently in editorials, the links that are forged between climate change and anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, hidden motives, moralizing, populist anger, and state violence push the boundaries of acceptable journalism (Harrison, 2006: 144). Equally significant are the leaps in logic contained in many letters, which are made with the goal of making a “common-sense” connection with readers. These serve to bring disparate thematic elements together that often weave scientific and moral claims into grand but simplistic narratives about the desirability or undesirability of climate change action. In this respect, letters also use climate change metaphorically, although in a very different way than in other sections of the newspaper. In letters, climate change is a metaphor for emotional issues, such as duplicity, hypocrisy, depravity, and racism. These claims, each of which is “unprovable” by the standards of fact-based journalism, are only possible under the unique functional and normative circumstances of the letters page that favor punchy, to the point, and innuendo-based argumentation.

As such, letters ought to be seen as ways of boundary-pushing or broaching taboo subjects and ideas that cannot stand up to normal journalistic scrutiny. While editorials and columns also allow for some “creative irresponsibility” in this regard, the content analysis showed that editorials for the most part follow the same thematic lines as articles and features. It is likely that letters’ origins outside the media sandbox allow or forgive such behavior (Atkin and Richardson, 2007). Editors, who admittedly have imperfect control over letter content, are using *vox populi* to publish claims and arguments about climate change that otherwise would not have a place in the print news media.

6. Conclusion

The ideology of letters to the editor is that they represent a way for the general public to participate in and speak back to the mass media (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2002b). As such, they are usually examined through the lens of how well they reflect public opinion (e.g., Hill, 1981) or allow for more participative and deliberative forms of democracy and public debate (e.g., Wahl-Jorgenson, 2001; Raeymaeckers, 2005; Nip, 2006). The reality, however, is that the public appearing on letters pages is a constructed public that is assembled by professional editorial staff using raw materials provided by letter writers. This constructed public is therefore a hybrid entity that reflects the functional and normative pressures facing both writers and editors more than general public opinion.

With respect to climate change coverage in Canada, this constructed public is a means of advancing fringe topics, arguments, language, and narratives into the media landscape. The content analysis revealed that letters are topically and thematically different from other sections of the newspaper. Moreover, I have argued that the charged language used in many letters, particularly the insinuation about motives, the leaps in logic, intentional irrationality, and use of morally charged metaphors, is only possible in the unique normative space of letters. While several other studies of climate change coverage have excluded letters from their analysis, I argue that letters ought to be considered an important component of “reconstructing” the climate change issue for consumption by the general public. Letters are a way to push the boundaries of acceptable journalism using the mask of entertainment and lively debate. This is not without consequences. While

many of the arguments in letters clearly have their roots in activist and skeptic websites, their appearance in newspapers gives them wider exposure and, more importantly, the veneer of legitimacy. As noted by Allan (1999: 93), newspapers have the ability to influence “the [societal] boundaries of legitimate and fair comment” in a way that most websites, comments pages, and personal blogs do not (see also Nip, 2006: 228). In other words, letters are a way to bring the fringes in, thus ensuring their continued relevance in public discussions and debates about climate change.

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Notes

1. For instance, *The Halifax Chronicle* is a regional newspaper of record, but was unavailable in electronic format at the time of study.
2. The keywords in French were “changement(s) climatique(s), réchauffement planétaire, gaz(es) à effet(s) de serre.”
3. A linear regression test was used, with narrative complexity index score as the dependent variable: $y = 0.01 (\text{word count}) - 0.55 (\text{news item}) - 0.63 (\text{letter to the editor}) - 0.39 (\text{feature}) + 2.54 (\text{constant})$.

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Author Biography

Nathan Young is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Ottawa, Canada. His research interests include environmental sociology, economic sociology, media studies, and resource management. His most recent book (with Ralph Matthews) is *The Aquaculture Controversy in Canada: Activism, Policy and Contested Science* (UBC Press, 2010).