

A CONVENIENT EXCUSE

DEAR MAINSTREAM MEDIA COLLEAGUES: TIME IS RUNNING OUT TO PREVENT CLIMATE CATASTROPHE. YOU ARE FAILING US ALL.

BY WEN STEPHENSON

On October 2, I led a climate protest inside the offices of the *Boston Globe*.

OK, it was really a meeting in a small conference room with editorial page editor Peter Canellos, an old colleague of mine, and members of his staff. But it was, in essence, a protest.

I used to be a card-carrying member of the mainstream media; just a few years ago, I was the editor of the *Globe's* Ideas section. Peter is a former colleague.

With me was Craig Altemose, founder and executive director of Better Future Project, a Cambridge-based non-profit dedicated to climate action, on whose working board I serve as a volunteer. We were joined by two members of BFP's advisory board: MIT's Kerry Emanuel, one of the country's leading climate scientists (and, until recently, a Republican); and Boston College's Juliet Schor, a sociologist and economist who is a respected thinker on climate and the economy. Last year, Altemose was arrested protesting the Keystone XL pipeline at the White House along with another advisory board member, Bill McKibben of 350.org, and 1251 other concerned citizens.

After a quick round of introductions, I explained to my former *Globe* colleagues that I wasn't there to "save the planet" or to protect some abstraction called "the environment." I'm really not an environmentalist, and never have been. No, I said, I was there for my kids: my son, who's 12, and my daughter, who's 8. And not only *my* kids — *all* of our kids, everywhere. Because on our current trajectory, it's entirely possible that we'll no longer have a livable climate — one that allows for stable, secure societies to survive — within the lifetimes of today's children.

And I told them that I was there, in that room, because the national conversation we're having about this situation, this emergency, is utterly inadequate — or, really, nonexistent. And I looked Peter in the eye, and told him that I'm sorry, but that's completely unacceptable to me. If we can't speak honestly about this crisis — if we can't lay it on the line — then how can we look at ourselves in the mirror?

Since I had requested the meeting, I told Peter that I hoped to frame the discussion around two points:

First: We need to see a much greater sense of *urgency* in the media's coverage of climate change, including in the *Globe's* editorial and opinion pages. This is more than an environmental crisis: it's an existential threat, and it should be treated like one, without fear of sounding alarmist, rather than covered as just another special interest, something only environmentalists care about. And it should be treated as a central

issue in this election, regardless of whether the candidates or the political media are talking about it.

Second: Business-as-usual, politics-as-usual, and journalism-as-usual are failing us when it comes to addressing the climate threat. If there's to be any hope for the kind of bold action we need, a great deal of pressure must be brought from outside the system, in the form of a broad-based grassroots movement, in order to break the stranglehold of the big-money fossil fuel lobby on our politics. And in fact, there *is* a movement emerging on campuses and in communities across the country — especially here in New England — and the *Globe* should be paying attention to it.

But that wasn't the conversation Peter was prepared to have — and we never got around to having it.

Canellos, the paper's former Washington bureau chief, was more interested in the short-term politics of the Keystone pipeline debate, and the economic impact of natural gas expansion in Massachusetts, and what raising renewable energy standards would mean for regional jobs. Smart, sensible questions. Balanced. Analytical. Above the fray. In short, what counts as serious on the opinion pages of mainstream American newspapers.

And, it has to be said, they were questions that revealed precisely the kind of narrow, incremental, politically straitjacketed mindset that's leading us off the climate cliff. Indeed, they were the kind of questions that make you wonder whether the speaker is

even aware of the cliff we're racing toward — or what planet we're living on.

Yes, the *Globe's* editorial page supports policies to curb greenhouse emissions. It recently called, in the lead editorial on August 26, for lowering the emissions cap imposed by the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), which has already reduced carbon emissions from power plants in the Northeast faster than expected.

Good for them. But that same editorial was telling, and representative, in a far more important way. With its underlying message that, hey, we're making real progress here, things are going better than planned — that, in short, we're *winning* — it revealed an utter failure to grapple with the scale and urgency of the climate crisis. It revealed the same outlook that was on display in that meeting.

But it's not only the *Globe*. This failure is repeated across the mainstream media landscape — the product of a mindset in which climate change is simply another environmental problem, albeit a particularly complex one for which we'll eventually find a technical fix, mainly by doing more or less the same things we're doing now, only more efficiently and with better technology. It's nothing to get too excited about.

It's certainly not anything to sacrifice your career over.

About a year and a half ago — having left my job as the senior producer of NPR's *On Point* the year before — I took a deliberate leap of conscience and became a climate activist.

There was no single moment when I knew that I had to jump — any more than there's a single moment when night turns to day. It was a gradual process of coming to see the facts that were right in front of me. In December 2009, while still at *On Point* (a show that has since done better than most in conveying the urgency of the climate crisis), I watched the collapse of the UN climate talks in Copenhagen, a make-or-break moment for the planet. In the voices of cool-headed climate experts, I now heard the sound of something new: something like fear, and disbelief, and the sound of real anger, bitterness, outrage. Then in the spring and summer of 2010, as it became clear that Congress would fail to pass even the weakest bipartisan climate legislation, and that the president of the United States would fail to lead, and that all the lobbying the environmental movement could muster

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would fail to match the power of the fossil fuel lobby, I watched the tragedy of our democracy unfold and felt in my gut the futility of a corrupt and paralyzed political system.

But in the end, even more than any play of events, or any rational analysis of the hopeless political situation, perhaps it was this: I found it increasingly difficult to look into my children's eyes.

As an editor and producer covering national and global issues since the mid-1990s, I'd always been relatively well informed about climate change. Or so I thought. In fact, like most of my peers, I'd never really wrapped my head around the full implications of climate science, or internalized how little time we have left to make a difference. As I dove into the subject in 2010 and 2011, going deep in a way that time-pressed editors and producers rarely do, I felt an overriding responsibility — especially in light of my own lackluster record covering climate — to *engage*. If that meant working outside the bounds of mainstream journalism, then so be it.

I knew that if I was really committed to the path of activism, I would almost certainly never be hired again by a mainstream media outfit like WBUR or the *Globe*, or PBS *Frontline* (where I was managing editor of the web edition from 2001 to 2004), or even a magazine like *The Atlantic* (where I was an editor from 1994 to 2001 and served as editorial director of *TheAtlantic.com*). I knew that once I'd crossed the line to the "other side," there could be no turning back.

Over the past 18 months, I've helped organize and spoken at rallies, joined the board of Better Future Project, and helped launch 350 Massachusetts, a statewide grassroots network, allied with 350.org. And as I've become deeply involved in the climate movement, I've often thought about what I'd say to my old friends and colleagues in the mainstream media if we were all together in the same room, or if I could address them in an open letter.

Now the *Phoenix* has offered me that opportunity, and this is what I want to say.

DEAR FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES:

This is hard. Coming to grips with the climate crisis is *hard*. It's frightening. It's infuriating. It's heartbreaking.

Likewise, what I have to say here is hard. But it's honest, and it's necessary. And it's for real.

Our most respected climate scientists, people like NASA's James Hansen and MIT's Kerry Emanuel, as well as global economy experts such as Fatih Birol, chief economist of the International Energy Agency — people who, it's fair to say, may not always agree on politics and policy — are increasingly clear and vocal about one thing: we're rapidly

running out of time to address climate change in any meaningful way and avoid the risk of global climate catastrophe, with the incalculable human suffering that it will bring, quite possibly in this century.

In the face of this situation — as much as it pains me to say this — you are failing. Your so-called "objectivity," your bloodless impartiality, are nothing but a convenient excuse for what amounts to an inexcusable failure to tell the most urgent truth we've ever faced.

Let me be clear: the problem isn't simply a matter of "false balance" — for most of you, that debate is largely over, and you no longer balance the overwhelming scientific consensus with the views of fossil-fuel lobby hacks. No, what I'm talking about is your failure to cover the climate crisis *as a crisis* — one in which countless millions, even billions, of lives are at stake.

In our current media landscape, it apparently takes a magazine like *Rolling Stone* — in an issue with Justin Bieber on the cover — to offer a writer like Bill McKibben the opportunity to spell out the facts, in cold hard arithmetic, for a mass audience. McKibben's landmark article this past summer, "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math," boiled the hard truth about climate down to three stark numbers:

- *Two degrees Celsius*: the amount, according to international consensus, that we can raise the global average temperature above preindustrial levels and still maintain a so-called "safe" climate, beyond which all bets are off. "Safe," of course, depends on where you live. We've already raised it almost one degree, with disastrous results; if you live in Africa, or the Maldives, one degree is too much.

- *565 gigatons*: the amount of CO₂ scientists agree we can still pump into the atmosphere and hope to remain below the two-degree threshold.

- *2795 gigatons*: the amount of CO₂ contained in the world's proven fossil-fuel reserves, which the fossil-fuel industry shows every intention of extracting and burning.

The bottom line: we have to find a way to leave 80 percent of currently accessible fossil fuels *in the ground, forever*; and make a rapid shift to clean energy, if we're going to avoid the very real risk of catastrophic climate change within this century. When you get a grip on those numbers, something like the Keystone protest — driven by the idea that the Alberta tar sands, the planet's second-largest pool of carbon, should be off-limits — comes into focus. It's more than math: it's a moral imperative. That's why 1253 people were willing to get arrested in front of the White House in order to stop that pipeline, even temporarily.

"Unsafe" climate change is not a distant threat. It's here, now. We've fundamentally altered the planet's life-support system, and conditions are going to get much worse.

If you've enjoyed this year's record heat, wildfires, drought, and spiking global food prices — get used to it.

Of course there's uncertainty about exactly how these changes will unfold. There will always be uncertainty in anything as complex as climate science. But as MIT's Emanuel has said, "Uncertainty doesn't translate into 'no worries, mate.'" In fact, it's the opposite. Uncertainty, he notes, "is a double-edged sword." It's possible, Emanuel and his colleagues acknowledge, that the impacts of climate change will be less severe, and arrive more slowly, than the most sophisticated models predict. But it's *equally probable* that the impacts will be much *more severe*, and arrive *much faster*, than predicted. So far, mounting evidence like the rapid melting of the Arctic ice cap — one of the planet's largest physical features, which reached its lowest extent ever recorded this summer, blowing away all predictions — suggest that the latter may well be the case.

What's more, as Emanuel and others go on to point out, because of the inherent inertia of the planet's climate system, and the sheer amount of CO₂ already in the atmosphere, our "window of opportunity" to prevent catastrophic warming is extremely narrow. It may even have already closed. We don't know. According to the IPCC, global emissions need to drop *at least* 25 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 — *eight years* from now — and *at least 80 percent* by 2050, if we're going to have a shot at maintaining a livable climate.

Yet even as climate scientists sound increasingly alarmed, there's virtual silence in the mainstream media — even in the midst of a crucial election campaign — about the urgency of the threat. This is the case even in places that feature serious coverage of climate science, including the *New York Times* and NPR. A welcome exception was this quote of Rutgers scientist Jennifer A. Francis in *Times* reporter Justin Gillis's August 27 piece on Arctic sea ice: "It's hard even for people like me to believe, to see that climate change is actually doing what our worst fears dictated. . . . It's starting to give me chills, to tell you the truth." (The story didn't make the front page.) In the *Globe*, a piece like David Abel's lead A1 treatment, on June 25, of increasing sea-level rise along the northeastern seaboard, and what it means for Boston — the fact that in coming decades a mere nor'easter could put a half dozen Boston neighborhoods under water — was an all too rare acknowledgment of what's really at stake.

The Atlantic, now edited by an old friend of mine, has failed to run a single in-depth feature, much less a cover story, on the climate crisis in *almost two years* — since Jim Fallows' December 2010 cover story on the daunting problem of coal. But in the magazine's annual "Ideas" issue this summer, Chrystia Freeland cheerily noted that "fossil fuels are here to stay" — without

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a hint that she, or the editors, are aware that climate change is happening. (The editors of theatlantic.com seem to know climate change is happening, but true to prevailing Beltway wisdom, they apparently consider it a lower-order concern.) PBS *Frontline* has just aired the welcome though belated *Climate of Doubt*, a disturbing look at the people driving the climate-science denial machine. We should be grateful. But it's been almost exactly *four years* since the series produced a documentary on climate: 2008's *Heat*. Indeed, even the *New Yorker*, home to the invaluable climate reporter Elizabeth Kolbert, has devoted more space and more serious consideration in the past year to the insanity of geo-engineering (in a piece by Michael Specter) than to the kinds of policies, such as an economy-wide price on carbon, that economists across a wide spectrum say are necessary — and the kind of politics that could make them possible.

What's needed now is *crisis-level coverage*. And you guys know how to cover a crisis. In the weeks and months — nay, years — following 9/11, all sorts of stories made the front pages and homepages and newscasts that never would have been assigned otherwise. The same was true before and after the Iraq invasion, and in the months following the 2008 financial meltdown. In a crisis, the criteria for top news is markedly altered, as long as a story sheds light on the crisis topic. In crisis coverage, there's an assumption that readers want and deserve to know as much as possible. In crisis coverage, you "flood the zone." You shift resources. You make hard choices.

The climate crisis is the biggest story of this, or any, generation — so why the hell aren't you flooding the climate "zone," putting it on the front pages and leading newscasts with it every day? Or even *once a week*? Why aren't you looking constantly at how the implications of climate change and its impact pervade almost any topic — not just environment and energy stories?

And yet, I'm less worried about the news pages, where editors do seem to be slowly waking up, than about the opinion pages and magazines, the commentariat and wonkish mainstream blogs — the "thought leaders," the Very Serious People who define the conventional wisdom and the parameters of what passes for serious discussion. Because here, there's essentially no debate of any kind that reflects the scale and urgency of the crisis. Forget the pathetic and deeply cynical climate silence in the presidential debates — and forget CNN's Candy Crowley, who can't be bothered to select a question from "all you climate change people." Even on the left and center-left, climate is barely mentioned when the stakes of this election are discussed — and when the topic does come up, it's without any sense of urgency. Witness the recent endorsement issues of *The Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *New Yorker*. It's as though many of the best journalistic minds

of multiple generations quail at the thought of seriously addressing what a crisis of this magnitude implies about their long-held assumptions — the unquestioned primacy of endless economic growth, for example, or the notion that there can be economic justice without climate justice.

The same goes for these pages: why has the *Phoenix* covered the Occupy movement and not, until now, the climate movement?

At the end of the day, I think we agree, a journalist's ultimate responsibility is to the public. And yet, by that measure, you are failing. You are failing to treat the greatest crisis we've ever faced like the crisis that it is. *Why?*

Look, unlike most of your critics, I know you. You're not just names on a page or a screen to me: you're living, breathing human beings, with lives and families. I've shared the stresses and anxieties of journalism in this era. I know how hard you work, and how relatively little (most of) you are paid. I know how insecure your jobs are. And I know that your work — even your very best work — is most often thankless. Believe me. I know.

I also know that you take your responsibility as journalists, as public servants, seriously. Why is it, then, that you are so utterly failing on this all-important topic? I could be wrong, but I think I understand. I'm afraid it has to do with self-image and self-censorship.

Nothing is more important to me as a journalist than my independence. Yes, I'm still a journalist. And I'm as independent as I've ever been — maybe, if you can imagine this, even more so. Because leaving behind my mainstream journalism career has freed me to speak and write about climate and politics in ways that were virtually impossible inside the MSM bubble, where I had to worry about perceptions, and about keeping my job, and whether I'd be seen by my peers and superiors as an advocate. God forbid.

In short, I'm freed of an insidious form of self-censorship, based on a deeply misguided self-image all too common among mainstream media types, in which journalists, including "serious" opinion journalists, are supposed to remain detached and above the fray — not to say cynically aloof and perpetually bemused — in order to be taken seriously. Once you've become an advocate, once you've taken an unambiguous moral stand, so the thinking goes, your intellectual honesty is compromised.

Well, I'm sorry, but that's just bullshit.

When I became a journalist, I didn't check my conscience, my citizenship, or my humanity at the door. Nor, when I became an advocate and activist, did I sacrifice my intellectual honesty. If anything, I salvaged it.

It's time to end the self-censorship and get over the idea that journalists are somehow above the fray. You're not above the fray. If you're a human being, you're in the fray whether you like it or not — because on this one, we really are all in it together. And by downplaying or ignoring the severity

of the climate crisis — or by simply failing to understand it — you're abdicating your responsibility to your fellow human beings.

What it all comes down to, then, is this: *Which side are you on?*

If you're on the side of your fellow human beings — and of your own children and grandchildren — then it's time for you to level with the public about the severity, scale, and urgency of the crisis we face.

Bill McKibben recently told me something that hit home: we need to start asking hard questions not only of the climate deniers and obstructionists, but of our friends and allies. For example, he said, we need to ask our universities, such as Harvard (Bill's alma mater and mine) — institutions that have contributed so much to our understanding of climate change — why they invest any portion of their endowments in the fossil fuel industry, the very industry that is standing in the way of climate action and foreclosing our future? Growing numbers of students at Harvard, Brandeis, Tufts, Amherst, and dozens of other schools, are beginning to ask just that — as part of an emerging campus divestment movement — and they deserve your attention.

We also need to ask far tougher questions of progressive political leaders, like Elizabeth Warren and Barack Obama, who accept climate science and make various encouraging gestures, but nevertheless fail to spell out how seriously they take the climate crisis — and exactly what they propose we do about it.

Such silence, and near silence, is no longer acceptable. To use a phrase from the heroic struggle for AIDS awareness in the '80s and '90s: silence equals death. For countless millions of people, *climate silence equals death*.

In other great moral crises — the civil rights struggle, the Vietnam War, the long fight against apartheid, and many others — journalists have had to confront their conscience. So here are my hard questions for all of you, the very same questions I ask myself:

As individuals of conscience, *where will you stand?* If you don't have what it takes to level with the public about the situation we're in, and what it requires, then what are you doing in this business? Why are you a journalist? How do you get out of bed in the morning and look at yourself in the mirror? How do you look your own children or grandchildren — any children — in the eyes?

Your friend and colleague,
Wen

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