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Responding to Charges of Climate Hype

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Abstract: I consider hype as it relates to discourse surrounding climate change. The presence of hype about a subject can make it difficult to judge what and whom one should believe. This may lead concerns about climate change to be unfairly dismissed. For this reason, I argue that advocating for climate change mitigation efforts requires not only reiterating the soundness of the underlying science, but also understanding the social and psychological phenomena that produce the confusion.

Keywords: argumentation, climate change, communications, hype, media

1. Introduction: A case of climate hype

In October of 2015, Eric Holthaus, the climate and weather blogger for *Slate*, published a post in which he discussed recent research (Pal & Eltahir, 2015) on the effects of climate change on weather patterns in the region surrounding the Persian Gulf. The researchers found that by the end of the 21st century, some portions of the region could experience temperatures so high that it would become nearly impossible for humans to survive without the use of artificial cooling systems. Although the authors were circumspect in their claims, and careful to note that such heat events would only occur for six hours at a time once a decade or so, media reports were not nearly so careful. Holthaus notes that stories about the finding were announced with headlines that bordered on the apocalyptic. The website of *Time*, for example, teased a post on the topic with the headline “These Cities May Soon Be Uninhabitable Thanks to Climate Change”, while the website of the Discovery Channel went with the ominous “Burning Hell Coming for Mideast Deserts” (Holthaus, October 27, 2015). Although the actual stories accompanying these headlines were generally more measured in their claims, crucial information (for example, that even in the worst case scenario, such heat events would be relatively infrequent and of relatively short duration) tended to be buried. Holthaus notes, for instance, that this information does not appear until the tenth paragraph of the story published in *The New York Times*.

Holthaus is concerned about the way this story was covered for a couple of reasons. First, he notes that apocalyptic headlines badly misstate the import of the research—although the predicted heat events could be potentially deadly for anyone away from air-conditioned spaces, their relative infrequency and short duration would not make the region uninhabitable in the sense the coverage implied. Secondly, and he thinks more importantly, by presenting an apocalyptic vision of the future, the media coverage missed Pal and Eltahir’s most important point—that the worst case scenario is avoidable if, in the present moment, humanity adopts suitable measures to mitigate anthropogenic climate change. Holthaus frames this as a choice between motivating the public to act on the problem and inducing despair. In another post from the same month, this time decrying media claims that Antarctica could lose its ice cover by the end of the century, Holthaus expresses this thought in the following way: “But lost in all the hype is an important message: It’s not too late to save a really, really huge proportion of the ice

the frozen continent contains—and thus, virtually every coastal city on Earth” (Holthaus, October 14, 2015). He goes on to note that the rate and degree to which Antarctic ice melts is within human control, and that “[i]f that point is not clearly made, journalists risk provoking unnecessarily paralyzing despair in their readers” (Holthaus, October 14, 2015). In other words, the way stories of this kind have been covered not only involves a misstatement of the research findings, it also shifts public attention away from the information that would be the most helpful to know, and makes substantively addressing the issue that much harder.

In making this point, Holthaus invokes the word “hype”, a concept that, though in common circulation and often deployed in disputes both political and scientific, has received relatively little attention in scholarly circles, and even less from philosophers. This lack of philosophical attention is disappointing because the presence of hype presents a number of implications for the success of communication and argumentation. In a previous paper (Auch, 2013), I argued that hype *creates a context* in which arguments take place and tends to distort one’s usual intuitions about the value and importance of claims made in such an environment. As such, whether one’s aim is to convince one’s audience of something, or to find one’s way to the truth, one must be aware of the ways in which a hype context warps the usual contours of the argumentative space. For this reason, it is important to examine the ways in which a given issue may intersect with different people’s experience of hype. In this paper, I aim to think through the ways in which hype intersects with attempts to build consensus around efforts to prevent or mitigate the effects of anthropogenic climate change. As we will see, there is reason to think that discourse surrounding climate change is particularly susceptible to charges of hype. For this reason, it is important to identify the substance of such charges, their rhetorical functions, as well as how they might be answered.

2. The hype charge

When ascribed to beliefs or discourse about a given topic, the term ‘hype’ has the rhetorical function of encouraging an audience to dismiss such beliefs or discourse from serious consideration. Let us give the name ‘the hype charge’ to instances in which the term is used in this way. So, for example, Holthaus invokes the hype charge when he suggests that claims that Antarctica’s ice cover might disappear by the end of the present century are not worthy of serious consideration. The hype charge also has a secondary function: it allows those putting it forward to position themselves as more sober, more circumspect, more careful than those targeted by the charge.¹ In Holthaus’ case, something of this dynamic can be seen when he bemoans the fact that the media focus on apocalyptic scenarios is likely to undermine the more important (to his mind) message that the (considerably more measured) worst case scenarios are avoidable if appropriate action is taken. By calling the exaggerated media coverage “hype”, Holthaus aims to reinforce judgments about the proper message to derive from the research.

Given the clear disparity between the contents of the published research findings and the way they were reported, it seems likely that most people would agree that Holthaus is justified in deploying the hype charge against (at least some) of the media coverage in the cases he describes. However, the hype charge has also been deployed by those who deny the existence of anthropogenic climate change. In such cases, the hype charge is deployed to present the position that the very idea of dangerous anthropogenic climate change is an exaggeration (or indeed a

¹ Uskali Mäki (2010), writing about the emerging discipline of neuroeconomics, explores the rhetorical function of hype charges in more detail.

fabrication), with the implication that the issue may already be unworthy of the attention it has received. The hype charge also serves, at least implicitly, to characterize those who do advocate for substantive action on climate change as too emotionally or politically compromised to be taken seriously.²

Let us take stock. So far, we have seen that hype intersects with discourse surrounding climate change in a number of ways. Holthaus has argued that climate research is often exaggerated into apocalyptic claims by the media. This exaggeration is problematic because it creates a sense of despair about the prospects for combating climate change by shifting attention away towards worst case scenarios and away from claims that such scenarios can be avoided by taking action in the present. Our discussion of the hype charge identified another dimension—calling something hype is often a means of dismissing it from serious consideration and a way of impugning the credibility of those who express such claims.

In short, we can say that hype has the following features: i) it affects the emotions of a community, with the potential of creating despair in the place of hope; ii) it is capable of shifting attention to particular areas of concern (and away from other, potentially worthier areas of concern); iii) it makes it difficult to make clear judgments about what and who to trust.

3. A framework for hype

We need a better handle on just what hype is and what it is not. The word is used in many different ways, and it is difficult to recover a single definition that covers all the salient usages. For example, although hype seems to be connected to promotional activity in some way, it also seems to involve the *effects* of such activity. For example, the first definition given for ‘hype’ in the *American Heritage Dictionary* (5th ed.) is “Excessive publicity *and the ensuing commotion*” (emphasis mine). The use of the word ‘excessive’ in the definition suggests that these effects are not generally good ones. This fits with Holthaus’ use of the term to characterize a kind of exaggerated coverage media coverage. However, dictionary definitions will only take us so far. We need a more robust framework for thinking about hype.

Devon Powers (2012), one of the few scholars to study the topic comprehensively, has supplied just such a framework: Hype, on her view, consists in “a state of anticipation, caused by the circulation of promotion, resulting in a crisis of value” (Powers, 2012, p. 863). Although it does not cover all uses of the word, Powers’ framework is helpful to the present enterprise insofar as it provides a means of conceptualizing some of the problems we have identified hype as producing for discourse about climate change. However, before thinking about climate change more directly, it is worth spending a little time investigating the main elements of Powers’ framework.

The first component of Powers’ framework (2012) is that hype is to be understood as “a state of anticipation”. Although it may seem strange to identify hype with an emotional state, rather than an activity, there are good reasons to think of the phenomenon in this way. For one thing, it helps to capture the worry, expressed by many who deploy the term in ordinary discourse, that hype raises people’s expectations so much that their eventual disappointment is all but inevitable. It also helpfully shifts consideration away from what is said, and towards the

² One can see this dynamic play out in the titles of climate skeptic literature. For example, Bjorn Lomborg (2007) has titled his book on climate change “Cool It”, suggesting that he believes the discourse surrounding climate change has become too overwrought.

effect those words have on others. To hype something is thus not just uttering exaggerated falsehoods, but unsustainably inflating the expectations of one's audience.

Next, Powers (2012) attributes this state of anticipation to "the circulation of promotion". "Promotion", in this case, is to be understood quite broadly, including both traditional advertising and public relations work as well as coverage in the traditional media and postings and discussions on social media. Promotion can be said to circulate when it moves back and forth from one domain to another, as happens when news organizations report on a story, others comment upon it, and the organization then reports on those comments. This circulation may be attributable to structural features in the media landscape, where heavy competition for readers results in a large number of outlets chasing the same story. A new dynamic has emerged as this process has moved online. Due in part to the business model for online publishing, there is an incentive for organizations to publish material in a way that will encourage readers to click on or share it. Hence the move towards coy, sensational, or apocalyptic headlines (like the ones from *Time* and the Discovery Chanel mentioned above). Even without exaggerations of this kind, the sheer number of stories about a topic may raise audience expectations to a much higher level than they would be under normal circumstances. The important thing to note is that the relationship between these raised expectations and the promotion that causes them is a dynamic one, involving many players. Hype, in this sense, is not a simple irresponsible exaggeration on the part of a single individual, but a particular state of affairs within a given discursive community.

Finally, Powers (2012) notes that hype results "in a crisis of value." Because the circumstances driving the circulation of promotion are a constant feature of the discursive landscape, an individual may be expected to experience this process several times. As their expectations are raised and deflated over and over again, members of the public may find it difficult to calibrate judgments about hyped topics. In more traditional cases of hype (those involving traditional advertising), the hype surrounding a product makes it difficult to determine its value in dollars and cents to a given individual. While some people might come to overvalue the product on the basis of the hype surrounding it, others, aware of the hype, might come to undervalue it. In other contexts, however, the value in question may be an epistemic one, in the sense of being something deserving of one's attention and belief. In other words, the presence of hype about a subject warps one's ability to make judgments about what is worth paying attention to. Along these same lines, hype can result in a crisis of *credibility*, where one is not quite sure of not only *what* one should believe but *who* one should trust as a responsible epistemic agent (and a reliable source).

Let us now return to Holthaus and the case of exaggerated climate science. It will be recalled that he is particularly concerned about the exaggeration of research findings related to climate change because such exaggerations are likely to push those who encounter them away from taking the actions necessary to avoid the worst outcomes. I want to argue that Powers' argument helps us to understand both why such exaggeration occurs, and why it is more likely to lead to despair rather than action.

Consider the following scenario: First, news of the research begins to circulate as the university press release is picked up by a number of news organizations. Because of already existing dynamics within the online news business,³ these organizations are likely to give reports on the research provocative and apocalyptic headlines, and focus them on the worst case scenarios (since it is this which is likely to gain the most clicks and the most shares). Next, the

³ These dynamics are explored in Vasterman (2005) and Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær (2009).

apocalyptic headlines create a sense of anticipation in readers—namely, that the Persian Gulf region is well on its way to becoming uninhabitable, or that Antarctic glaciers are in irrevocable retreat. As the process repeats itself over time, with each new climate change story greeted with the same kind of apocalyptic headlines and breathless coverage, readers may find it difficult to understand exactly what to believe, come to the conclusion that there is nothing that can be done and so fall into a kind of motivational inertia.⁴

4. Conclusion

This discussion leaves us with a difficult question: Given the framework for hype just described, how should someone who takes the existence and severity of anthropogenic climate change seriously respond to the charge that such concerns are nothing but hype?

At first blush, this seems like it should be a rather simple matter—all such proponents need to do is point to the mountains of data that support their claims, and to the scientific standards that ensure the integrity of their observations. In short, this way of answering the charge amounts to saying that scientific claims about anthropogenic climate change cannot be hype because they are true, and nothing true can be counted as hype. I think there are good reasons why advocates for substantive action should be wary of answering the charge in this way.

For one thing, hype seems less to be a matter of the truth than of appearances. For a climate scientist, or even someone well versed in the norms of scientific reasoning, the hype charge against climate change may seem self-evidently or obviously false. However, because of the technical know-how required to understand even the basics of climate science, most people (even those best positioned to take substantive action) do not have the ability to directly engage with research findings as they are presented to the scientific community. As such, they must rely on the way those findings are interpreted. At this point, judgments of credibility become central. As claims begin to deviate from an individual's everyday experience, they may become more inclined to treat them as hype. The difficulty for climate advocates is now clear: from this perspective, owing in part to the global scale of the issue, and to the unprecedented political, economic, and social challenges involved in addressing it, discourse about climate change already seems exaggerated, and any attempt to bring more attention to the issue will only serve increase this perception. What's more, as we saw with the examples that began this paper, advocates are not always in command of the message that reaches their intended audience. Because the public's understanding of scientific findings is almost always mediated by third parties, the potential for hype is always there. Since the hype charge, as used by climate change skeptics, attacks the credibility of advocates for climate change, we need some means of establishing that credibility even in the face of hype.

If what I have argued is correct, the process cannot be a not question of avoiding climate hype (and clearly demonstrating this fact to one's audience), as it is virtually impossible to avoid hype about such a wide-ranging and deeply important issue. What's more, because of the social nature of the communication networks involved, managing hype cannot be done in isolation.

⁴ Where does something like Holthaus' post fit into the picture just sketched? On the one hand, it seems as though such posts should not count as straightforward promotional activity. And yet, such moves to debunk hype themselves serve to draw further attention to the topic at hand. What's more, given their tendency to deflate expectations raised by the initial promotional activity, they seem to be just as likely to contribute to the process producing Powers' crisis of value.

One can be as measured as one wishes in one's published findings, but this is no guarantee that others will adhere to these same standards of reticence when reporting on them. Indeed, even if one had total message control, one would still be putting forward one's claims in a hype-rich environment. In such a context, the very presence of one's research could serve to raise the anticipation of the audience even further, with all the bad effects that come with it.

Hype challenges the assumption that 'the truth will out'—that simply speaking the truth will be enough to convince others of the importance and the self-evidence of the claims one makes. Those advocating for substantive action on climate change cannot be assured that they have avoided hype merely by sticking to the truth. Instead, advocates must proceed with the dynamics of hype in mind.

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