

The media need to get their act together when they report and editorialize about President-elect Donald Trump's public statements. Chief among many failures in reporting on the campaign was the tendency of major newspapers and television outlets to focus on candidates' rhetoric, symbolism, and character, to the virtual exclusion of governance and policy. This contributed to confusion and apathy about how each candidate was most likely to govern. To those of us who have been paying attention, it's no surprise that Trump's close advisors and likely Cabinet appointments include [Wall Street bankers](#), [shills for the oil industry](#), [lawyers and lobbyists for heavy industry](#), and [anti-regulatory ideologues](#). And it's therefore no surprise that his administration is likely to pursue an anti-consumer and anti-environment agenda and to favor big business and wealthy investors over other interests. But it seems that many people missed this.

To be fair, the media have turned towards more discussion of policy (including the policy consequences of likely appointments for key positions) in the new administration. But their coverage still seems, in a crucial way, to put rhetoric on par with actual decisionmaking and governance. While a President's rhetoric may matter a lot in some contexts, in areas where policy is what actually matters, it's a huge mistake to ignore policy. And it's just as much of a mistake to ignore the way that personnel – especially high-level appointees – make policy.

The New York Times' editorial-page coverage of Trump's views on climate change provides a good example of this phenomenon, as Joe Romm [has noted](#). Trump sat for an interview with the Times last week. In that interview, he said he believes there is "some connectivity" between human actions and the climate, and that he is keeping an "open mind" about the issue. The Times, in [an editorial published last week](#), expressed caution and alarm at his apparent lack of knowledge about the issue.

The problem is, as pleasant as it was to hear those remarks, it was alarming to confront how thinly thought through many of the president-elect's stances actually are. Consider climate change. Mr. Trump said that he valued clean air and water, but that he hadn't decided if combating climate change was worth the expense. "I have a totally open mind," he said, making a virtue of not knowing the issue.

In a [post](#) on this subject, my colleague Ann Carlson reviewed these same remarks. Ann suggested that Trump's recent remarks to New York Times staff provide a "sliver of hope" that his new administration may be open to addressing climate change. At the same time, she pointed out all the specific reasons why that hope is very likely to be misplaced. For

example, she concludes by noting that “[w]ho emerges in the next week or so to lead EPA, Interior and the Department of Energy will provide a signal about whether today’s statements had real meaning or were just an empty gesture.” We know who is on his team developing policy and vetting appointments. And these advisors are already hard at work planning to govern based on their priorities. Ann’s post lists many of those people and their affiliations, and correctly notes that “Trump’s transition team leaders is full of well-known climate deniers and fossil fuel representatives.”

Ann properly puts Trump’s comments into context. As, now, has Trump’s close advisor Reince Priebus, who has [walked back](#) Trump’s purported open-mindedness. But I’m concerned that the Times didn’t. Instead, they editorialized as if his comments were made in a vacuum – as if we had no idea how he is most likely to govern on this issue. But that’s misleading. Most policy decisions will unquestionably be made by his appointees and advisors, not by him personally. That’s true in most administrations, and will be especially true in this one. So while the policy stances he articulates in interviews certainly don’t seem well-considered or well-informed, that’s beside the point. By covering the President-elect’s statements at face value, and making his alleged naïveté, lack of knowledge, or “flexibility” the story, the NYT editorial board is focusing on the wrong thing. Their approach distracts from the things that actually matter: his policy decisions, which will be made by his appointees.

And the implications of this go beyond threats to sound regulatory and energy policy; it appears likely that the administration [may de-fund the basic scientific research necessary](#) to understand our climate system, as Dan Farber posted earlier today. [Bob Walker](#), a senior advisor to the President-elect who has spent his career as an arch-conservative Republican politician and, more recently, as a Washington lobbyist, is Trump’s senior advisor on NASA. And yesterday, [he said that the administration is planning to cut all funding for NASA’s climate research program](#). The Guardian quoted Walker as saying that doubt over human contribution to climate change

is a view shared by half the climatologists in the world. We need good science to tell us what the reality is and science could do that if politicians didn’t interfere with it.

Walker’s patently untrue comment, the falsity of which has [been confirmed by NASA itself](#), with supporting citations, is news because it reflects the likely position of the new administration from an advisor who is certain to influence Administration policy; on the

other hand, whether Trump's positions are "thinly thought through" or whether he personally believes that humans are contributing to climate change is not news, since he will not personally be making the decisions that matter. (This [Vox post by Brad Plumer](#) discusses, in detail, what NASA's research program accomplishes, why it's so important, and why the proposal to eliminate it is terrible.)

The Times editorial did acknowledge, in a superficial way, the dangerous views of Trump's advisors; the editorial closes with the comment that "so far he is surrounding himself with officials eager to enact only the most extreme positions. His flexibility would be their springboard." But by framing advisors' influence as conditional and as based on his "flexibility," the editorial doesn't fairly characterize what's happening: policy proposals are being developed right now that reflect those extreme positions. Moreover, and more to the point, the editorial fails to say anything of substance about the advisors and their "extreme positions" on climate change, the very issue where the Times is quoting Trump's comments as evidence of his lack of knowledge.

The Times hasn't ignored Trump advisors' positions on environmental issues entirely; for example, Andrew Revkin [has blogged about the NASA issue](#) specifically, and his post is well worth reading (though tellingly, his news sources were not from the Times, since it hasn't reported on the issue). And the paper has also profiled [Trump's key environmental advisor Myron Ebell](#) (though the article, with its "he said/she said"-style tone, doesn't explain how far out of the mainstream Ebell's views are, or how they are likely to influence policy, or the likely consequences to the world's climate). But overall, the paper has done a very poor job contextualizing Trump's public comments with information on how irrelevant they are to his policy initiatives. I fear this will continue once he is in office: whenever Trump wants to distract the media from actual decisionmaking, he need only make a confusing, incoherent statement to the media on a related topic.

It's pretty clear that Trump is poised to govern for the benefit of fossil fuel industries, including rolling back progress to decarbonize our energy supply to address climate change, on both the supply side (limiting extraction and production) and demand side (alternative energy development to reduce our appetite for fossil fuels). Perhaps of even more concern, his administration is likely to withdraw support for the basic scientific research necessary to understand the problem. This will happen no matter what the President-elect does or does not say in public. The media needs to focus on what is actually happening in the executive branch. Mr. Trump's words, or what we imagine he understands or doesn't understand, or what he spends his time thinking about, may be newsworthy in their own way – and may have cultural implications worth reporting on – but they are not reflective of the actual use of executive power. At a minimum, every time the media reports or comments on his words,

or speculates about what's on his mind, in an area that relates to policy, they have a responsibility to remind us what is actually happening on his watch. Otherwise, they're misleading their readers.