



Addressing Tipping Points for a Precarious Future

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Reflections of a Journalist

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[-] Abstract and Keywords

Tipping points are exciting yet frustrating for journalists. They evoke progressive disaster and possible sudden catastrophe. But the scientific uncertainty over their onset and outcome makes it very difficult for the serious journalist to be sure of what information to convey and when in the awareness cycle. Where there is good chance of reversibility and where there is political or economic inaction or obfuscation, there is a news story. But the social network is hampering the accuracy and clarity of communication and clogging up useful and productive debate. Journalists need to develop the courage, and to guide their news desks accordingly, that seriously important tipping points, even if vaguely familiar to readers, still require persistent and accurate coverage.

Keywords: tipping points, climate change deniers, social networking, reversibility, politics

A 'tipping point' is a useful phrase for a journalist. It is one of those bits of jargon used to describe a situation where some bad events begin to happen ever more rapidly and cannot be reversed. The term is borrowed from scientists who, my colleagues say, use it to describe the same continuous or discontinuous sequence of events. But in their perspective a tipping point can sometimes be reversible, as pointed out by Tim Lenton in Chapter 2.1. This provides a recipe for considerable public and journalistic misunderstanding and confusion.

The simplest illustration of this confusion in environmental terms (to a journalist) is the melting of the Greenland ice cap. Once the temperature reaches a certain level – say, 1°C warmer than present – the Greenland ice cap will begin progressively more rapidly to melt, and not stop melting until it is gone. Whether it is a 1°C or 2°C increase in temperature that will push the ice cap into unstoppable ice melt is up for scientific debate: and how quickly the melting will take place is likewise a matter of conjecture. What is certain (and of interest to journalists) is the catastrophic consequences of reaching that point for many of the world's cities located on low-lying coastlines.

Politically there are tipping points too. In the recent Arab Spring there comes a point when the old regime cannot hang on, and the revolution, velvet or violent, is bound to succeed. The characteristic of both tipping points is that there is no going back to the status quo. Greenland will not suddenly get cold again and the same tyrants will not resume power.

Scientists studying behaviour and journalists reporting in other fields could both use the term and there would be no misunderstanding. For example, consider describing situations in which rioting occurs. The tipping point in this case for both journalist and academic reports would **(p. 278)** be the police shooting of an unarmed suspect. The shooting is the tipping point that precipitates public disorder that then escalates into riots. This is an example of a tipping point that can be reversed by political action and public order restored.

As Joe Smith tells us, global warming is a difficult subject nowadays to get news desks interested in, which is why tipping points in the context of escalating transformation become so important. Journalists struggle to sell a story to their news desks because science in this area is incremental rather than a series of easily reportable 'new' discoveries. The politics too, particularly lately, have been glacial and at best inconclusive. A tipping point is therefore an interesting idea about which an invigorated discussion can take place. A good example is the long-running debate about parts per million by volume of carbon dioxide in the global atmosphere. What is the tipping point at which global warming begins to escalate, becomes runaway, and therefore unstoppable, thus ensuring most of the human race will be consigned to oblivion? Is the tipping point 350, 400, or 450 parts per million by volume of carbon dioxide? Discuss this and you will get your story in the paper. The key point is that it is irreversible. Politicians (and scientists) are seemingly fiddling while ensuring that the Earth burns.

Let us be controversial here. The difficulty in finding a hard and fast new fact on which to base a news story has been made worse by the weaknesses and fears of the scientific community. Scientists have retired to their bunkers aware of the power of the climate deniers to make their lives miserable. There has been a staggering campaign against scientists. Journalists have failed to expose this concerted, highly sophisticated, and frequently illegal persecution of scientists, and consequently failed to assist them in standing up to this powerful political lobby. This is surprising since the effort to discredit the science is paid for largely by the fossil fuel lobby and free market fanatics who are not particularly popular with newspaper journalists and the internet community. The motives of this dangerous bunch should have been questioned at every opportunity - but have not been.

In 25 years of covering climate change, initially at least, I thought there would be a tipping point when the overwhelming scientific consensus on the need for action, backed by Nicholas Stern and other economists, would finally tip the politicians into action. Lately it has been clear that this will not happen, and partly this has been due to the rapid disappearance of the mainstream media and its replacement by internet communication in all its forms. This has undermined objective, science- and fact-based journalism, **(p.279)** which needs time and resources to get it right. The internet is instant, and leaves no room for either. Anything goes, and when it comes to serious issues like climate change, a lot of what is reported is simply rubbish.

There are lots of other factors that make the reporting of climate issues difficult. Newspapers, radio, television, and blogs are obsessed with the size of their audience. Content is dictated by the need to survive. Thousands of newspapers and magazines have died in the last ten years, particularly in the United States, where much serious journalism has disappeared. This is why

British newspapers are now among the best read in the world – online. It is impossible to buy a print version of any serious newspaper in many North American cities.

Within news organizations battles have to be fought to get climate change reported. Eyes of news editors and editors glaze over at mention of the issue. Offered the choice of the prosecution of an international footballer for a racial slur, or a piece on the displacement of a million people because of climate change, there would be no contest. You might get somewhere on the climate story if all the one million had reached a political tipping point and decided the only way to get their message across was to get in boats, arrive in the south of England, and ask for a new homeland. Then it would be an interesting immigration story.

Journalists need to be able to use simple triggers or hooks to capture the news editor's attention – 'new', 'the first time', 'never before'. A tipping point provides a trigger for environmental journalists, a bad situation getting worse with no return to the status quo. But it has to be a real tipping point. A drought with some dieback of trees is reversible, a tipping point beyond which the forest cannot recover is another much more newsworthy event altogether. When we use these words, all of us need to be clear exactly what we mean.

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