TRANSCRIPT OF REMARKS BY
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Is covering climate change going to be ultimate test of the value of journalism?

The following is a transcript of a 40-minute speech by environmental activist and journalist Bill McKibben at a conference, "Journalism is Dead; Long Live Journalism," organized by Journalism That Matters, and following his receipt on Aprl 3, 2013 of the "Anvil of Freedom" award from the Edward W. Estlow International Center for Journalism and New Media at the University of Denver. This text and other links may be found at: http://journalismthatmatters.org/newjournalism/mckibben

What a great pleasure it is to be here. What a great pleasure it is to meet the Estlows. What a great pleasure it is to hear that introduction. I spent more of my life than I really like hearing myself introduced. I've got to turn on this microphone don't I? But rarely by the people who understand the sequence and the history of some of the things I've gotten to work, so I'm really greatful for that.

To me this very important gathering, because it really does bring together some of the strands of my life and gives me a chance to talk about a few of the things that interest me. Even before you've said correctly that I began my career as a journalist at the Harvard Crimson, but even before that, beginning in junior high I wrote for the local weekly newspaer – covered sports and Mr. Estlow you may almost be old enough like me to remember – I was paid 25 cents a column inch for covering basketball games. Which explains my ability to write at great length. You have to write a long time before 25 cents a column inch adds up to very much.

And so I really knew the journalism industry in its old incarnation. When I was at the Crimson, instead of writing a senior thesis I spent the winter tearing the Linotype machine out of the basement and installing the first computer equipment in the basement of the Crimson. When I got to the New Yorker at the age of 21 to start writing The Talk of the Town, I brought the very first computer into the New Yorker that anybody had ever seen. They did not like it. It was the first Mac. People came by and frowned. And I've gotten to see many, many parts of the kind of life cycle of journalism in our time and some of them very sad.

Last week I had the last story that was ever going to be published in The Boston Phoenix. It folded as they were going to press with a piece of mine. A newspaper that I remember reading as a boy growing up in Massachusetts. To have seen all those changes. But also to have seen the rise of all kinds of new and fascinating and interesting things. For me it's a moment of both some real peril because the economic model that we depended on for making sense of the world is disappearing, but also a moment of some great promise because the world that we're entering of journalism is far more democratic and interesting in a certain sense than the one I knew. There are days, some times, where on the front page of The New York Times, every byline is somebody I was on the Harvard Crimson with. And that's not a very healthy world, in a sense, to have that narrow a slice of human beings producing, and so it is excitring to be going someplace different. I don't get a chance to teach because I'm on the road so much but I have taught for a few weeks every year this fellowship in environmental journalism at Middlebury, we brought in 10 early-career journalists from around the country and spend a week with them at Middlebury in Vermont in the fall, honing, getting them ready to go out and do a long piece, figuring who they could talk to and how and then hadning them each ten grand and sending them out the door and then reconvening them in California in the spring to edit the pieces. And most of them have been published but more to the point all the kids who are doing it know how to do all kinds of things that I really don't. To take those stories and

make of them multimedia presentations that matter in all kinds of different ways. So it's been exciting to learn from them and to see what's going on.

I want to talk with reference to and keep coming back to journalism because I know that is what this conference is about and what you're interested in and I want to do it in reference to climate change because I think it is probably the single biggest example of a story that, well, we haven't managed to get right for all kinds of interesting reasons. When I first engaged it, when I wrote that first piece for the New Yorker that turned into (the book) *The End of Nature*, which was the first book about climate change for a general audience, part of it was that I was alarmed at what I was reading, but I wasn't really an environmentalist then. I was mostly a journalist. And I understood, quickly, that this was the most interesting story that there was in the world that this was literally the biggest thing that human beings had ever contemplated doing. And hence I was worried then. I was 27 when I was writing that book. I was worried then that surely someone was going to scoop me in the course of doing it. And I could hardly write fast enough. The horrible truth is that no only did nobody scoop me, it was a long time before anybody else wrote a book worth reading about it.

Think about it. Last summer, the Arctic melted. There now 20 percent of the ice in the Arctic that there was 40 years ago. We've taken the biggest physical feature on Earth and we've broken it. The Earth looks way different from space than it did when Neil Armstrong was up their wandering around on the moon. The ocean is 30-percent more acid than it was 40 years ago because the chemistry of seawater changes as it absorbs more carbon from the atmosphere. The atmosphere is 5 percent wetter than it was 40 years because warm air holds more water vapor than cold.

The biggest thing by far that's happened in the lifetime of anybody in this room is that we have left the Holocene, this 10,000-year period of benign climatic stability that underwrote the rise of human civilization. That's by far the biggest story and yet in real terms people don't know it, don't understand it, don't "get" that this is happening on this scale and threat that it represents. Any more than they understand that the 1 degree that we have raised temperatures so far, the same scientist that told us that would happen are now telling us that if we don't take swift action – very swift action faster than any government contemplates, that will be 4 or 5 degrees before this century is out. And if we raise temperatures like that there is no good reason to think we can have civilization as we know it. The agronomists at Stanford University and in Washington tell us that each 1 degree increase in global temperatures should cut grain yields about 10 percent. It's easy to see how that could happen when you look at what happened in Iowa last summer in the midst of this drought. Even here in Colorado, where you guys now have a fire season that essentially lasts 10 months of the year. When you can get up in an airplane and see millions of acres of trees killed by bark beetles who we know quite well are able to make that devastation because it doesn't get cold enough anymore to kill them off. When you have a ski industry, the iconic industry of this state, beginning to disappear. Even here it's not a question on people's lips most of the time. It is not a top-tier issue.

Somehow, that marks a failure, well, of many things. It's a great failure of our political system, which I will get to as well. But it is also a great failure of journalists. If our job is to tell people about the most important things that are happening in our world so they can act on them, it's pretty clear that it has been more failure than success. And on an issue with stakes higher than we've every faced before. We're sleep walking off the edge of a cliff, and our early-warning system, which is journalism, has largely failed to alert us to that in ways that matter. Which is not to say there hasn't been a lot of good journalism done – there has – and I could spent the whole time listing people now who've written great books and gret articles, but it hasn't broken through in the ways that it needs to.

'He-said-she-said' doesn't work well

I'm not going to spend a lot of time talking about all the kind of obvious reasons why. Because I think most of you think of journalism at all kind of know them. It has become literally the kind of journalism textbook example of the dangers of treating everything as a kind of adversarial process and balancing opinions on all sides. The he-said-she-said approach doesn't work very well with science because once scientists have reached a working consensus on something, that actually is what you would want to get across, not that there is some very small group who remain doubting.

It is a hard story to tell in a sense because it is complex – but not that complex. Journalists are able to write fluently about things that are far more complicated and harder to deal with, predict and understand than this. We write constantly about economic models about what the debt is going to be in 50 years or something like that. The level of imprecision that attaches to that is 10 times greater than the uncertainty that now surrounds climate models. But because it has something to do with science and because journalists stayed away from science when they were in college, there is this feeling that might be too hard. It's very hard to do this science, to build this computer model you've got to have a Ph.D. – but to understand it, you don't. In fact, to understand it is remarkably easy. When we started 350.org a few years ago,we took that odd name – it refers to the amount of carbon you can safely have in the atmosphere – 350 parts per million – the number came in 2008 from our greatest climatologist, Jim Hanson, who retired this week from NASA, after 40 some years there, so we took it because it was an important number.

Unfortunately we are already well past 350, we're at about 390 parts per mission and it is why the Arctic is melting and why Colorado is burning up. We took it because we were going to work globally and we needed an Arabic numeral not a slogan, as our way to cross linguistic boundaries. But when we took it, it was: "Ah, much too complicated, why would you take it, nobody will understand a wonky, scientific datapoint." And I just remember thinking it's really not that complicated. It's a number and the point is that we're above that number and so anybody can get that. It's like when you go to the doctor and the doctor says your cholesterol's too high, it's 250 and it us supposed to be at 200. Very few people then turn to the doctor and then say, "I need a fill disquisition on the lipid system before I can take this in." Most people just say, "OK, what pill do I take, what do I do now. I understand. It's too high. It's way above where you should be." And our experience has been that people understand it just fine. It is also worth nothing that very few people told that they have high cholesterol go home and search the web for internet sites telling them that cholesterol doesn't exist, or something like that. Another difference.

Speed of climate change a challenge to journalistic practice?

It also is difficult for journalism because it moves a tiny bit more slowly that we are use to having things moving. It moves extraordinarily fast in geological time. There was a new study published two weeks ago in *Science* showing that the planet is now warming 50 times faster than at any point during the Holocene. So in scientific terms, we're moving at absolutely unprecedented speed, but it doesn't change that much between the news at noon and the news at six, which is the cycle – well now we work on even faster cycles than that. So that made it a little hard I guess.

And of course the other thing that made it hard is that almost uniquely, literally uniquely, this was the issue on which the other side, that wanted to do nothing about it and just wanted us not to talk about it, just happened to have more money than any group of people in the history of the human race, literally. Exxon made more money last year than any company in the history of money. The CEO and Exxon spent the last 20 years funding people to spread dis-information about climate change and funding people to, when people wrote opinion pieces in the newspaper, to besiege the comment section with nasty attacks. So things made it difficult.

Nothing excuses failure to get basic facts to public

But none of those things excuse, I think the failure of our craft to get across this most basic piece of information – that the planet was heating and and in an out-of-control fashion. And what's been interesting to see is what did finally get it across. Because the polling data over the last couple of years indicates that there's been a huge spike in the number of Americans who are worried about climate change. And the thing that got it across, in the end, was not any of the kind of media we are used to dealing with. The medium that managed to get it across was the weather. Not the weatherman, the weather itself. Eighty percent or so of U.S. counties have had a federally declared disaster in the last two years. At a certain point, people just look out the door and understand what's going on. Or they look at the things that now we have no choice but to cover and cover intensely. The images last fall from our greatest city, where the Atlantic Ocean was suddenly filling the subway system. Where the streets of the Lower East Side became extensions of the East River. Talk about suddenly starting to understanding the fragility of the civilization we built. Or closer to home, watching Colorado Springs catch on fire. Reading the reports on that that emerged, some in the newspapers but often just in blogs and things, of people

describing driving 60 miles an hour in the station wagon across soccer fields trying to escape the flames. Suddenly you got a sense of what it was like.

Good news: Serious appetite for serious reporting

That's what's driving this new consciousness about climate change. And the good news for journalists is it opens up some room to do some of the kinds of work that we should have been doing all along on these things. Now that people are worried, there's some room to go and explain what it is they are worried about and more importantly what it is that we are going to do about it. And there is a serious appetite for this kind of explanation, even when it is difficult. I'll tell a little story about a piece I wrote last summer that was probably the most important, certainly the most-read thing that I have written since *The End of Nature.* And I've written a lot of books and articles since then. Last summer, I wrote a piece for *Rolling Stone.* Those of you who keep your back issues, it's the one with Justin Beiber on the cover. But the strange thing was that I got a call from the editor the next day who said, "This is weird but your piece has 10-times as many "likes" on Facebook as Justin Beiber's. And by the time it was done, it had been read online by three million people – which is on the one had is only 1 percent of Americans, but it is a pretty good number for serious journalism. It was a 6,000-word piece called, "The Terrifying New Math of Climate Change," and it was dense with numbers and it laid them out in a very straightforward way. I'll go through them, because it helps tell the story and it helps make the point that you can be serious to a greater degree, in fact seriousness is rewarded in some sense.

As I said in the piece, you really need three numbers to understand what's going on.

The first is 2 degrees. That's what the world's governments and most scientists have said is the most we can safely raise the temperature. In fact, it's actually, we now think is perhaps it is much too high. Now that we see that the 1 percent we have raised the temperature so far has melted the Arctic, most scientists would now like to very much take back the notion that 2 degrees could be OK. But it's the only thing that the world's governments have agreed to so it represents the only line that we can kind of hold people to. So it's an important number.

Second number was 500 gigatons of carbon – 565 gigatons of carbon. 565 billion tons. The computer modeling, most of it done up in the hills there of Boulder, is pretty clear that that's within fairly small error bars, how much more carbon we can put in the atmosphere and stay below that 2 degree red line that we all agree would be completely catastrophic. At the rate we're burning coal and gas and oil at the moment, it will take us about 15 years to blow past that number, OK? So that's pretty sobering, and it's a kind example of the kind of fact that should have been out in public circulating long ago and sort of understood, but wasn't.

But the scary number was the **third one,** and the new one and the reason I wrote the piece. And that came from a group of financial analysts in the U.K., not journalists, but financial analysts, who were wondering if there was kind of a "carbon bubble" forming, and they went and dug through all the S.E.C. filings and annual reports of the fossil-fuel companies and demonstrated that these guys had in their reserves about 2,800 gigatons worth of coal and oil and gas in their reserves already – five times as much as the most conservative governments on Earth think would be safe to burn. But of course they are going to burn it. The fact that it is in their S.E.C. reports and their annual-report filings means that is their business plan, right? In fact HSBC, the second biggest bank in the world, said in a report that came out at about the same time said that if we took the 2-degree target seriously we'd knock half the value off the share price of the fossil fuel industry. There is a "carbon bubble" if we are serious about dealing with climate change.

So once you had those three numbers lined up, then the optics of the whole thing changes. Sudden you realize that the end of the story's written – there is no room for speculation, or doubt, or wishful thinking. I've been covering this for 25 years and I was pretty shocked to see those numbers. Unless we change the script, the outcome is now obvious, inevitable. Written in black ink. And that's an important thing to know. It is one of the most important sets of facts that we have now in the world. So I was glad to get it out there and glad that it spread quickly. And glad that people understood it.

But now here is the second part of the story in part about journalism and what comes after it. It was also clear to me that merely writing about it wasn't going to be enough to make much happen. That's

something that has been dawning on me for a while. I was a good journalist, and nothing more, for a while. But at a certain point in the course of this 25 years of the global-warming era, it became clear to be that reason was not going to prevail on this issue. That if all it was going to take was scientists going up to Capitol Hill and exclaiming that the worst thing in the world was happening and here's what we needed to do about it, and the economists coming in right after them and saying, "Yes, and the solution's pretty simple – put a price on carbon." If that was going to be enough, it would have happened a long time ago. And instead nothing happened. We had a 25-year, bipartisan effort to accomplish nothing on Capitol Hill, and it continues.

That's why we started 350.org because we decided that we needed to build a movement here. And this movement could continue to evolve. So, once I had written that piece for *Rolling Stone* and once I saw the reaction to it, I said we need to do something about this, and this is what we're going to do. We're going to go out and take a tour of the country. We called it the "Do the Math Tour." And we rented a bus, and concert halls in 25 cities in America – big halls. And we sold them out – 25 nights in a row as you're driving around the country. And the point of doing it, was to try and spark a movement, in this case a movement on college campuses to get people to divest their fossil-fuel stock. And out of nothing, on one campus where this was going on, Swathmore, last fall, now there are 340 some campuses where this is going on and *The Nation* called it the largest student movement in the country a couple of weeks ago. It was kind of a conscious effort to take this piece of information and not only write about it but move it into other forms to make something happen with it.

Still a journalist, but not "objective" one?

Now, that means of course, and I long ago concluded, and in fact I concluded when I wrote *The End of Nature* that I was no longer in the sense that I was used to thinking about it, an "objective journalist." I.E. -- I knew that I didn't want the planet to heat up. I had taken sides in this, OK? And I knew it wasn't right for me to go be the beat reporter for *The Times* about climate change. That wouldn't be OK, you know? But it doesn't mean that I'm not a journalist anymore and completely capable of uncovering new stuff and spread it out and getting it around and then going in and trying to make it count for something, too, you know? And I think one of the things that's interesting about the moment we are moving into with journalism with the sort of rise of citizen journalism and with all the new forms that things are taking, is it's becoming more possible and more respectable to do that kind of work, to say, "I actually care about the outcome of this, I can't pretend."

I'm not willing to sort of make the artificial . . . that the effort to insist to myself or anyone else that knowing what I now know about climate change I don't care how it comes out. I do, and I want to do as much as I can about it, and there are a lot of increasing numbers of journalists and writers and everybody else who on this and other issues are doing some of that. Oddly, it makes it all the more imperative that you be an accurate journalist, because people are watching more closely in a sense. And you're cut no slack, you know? So it has sharpened if anything my fact-checking skills. I never want to leave any room for doubt. I'm a habitual understater instead of overstater. That's one of the things that learned from watching scientists, who are conservative by nature, and always understate problems instead of overstate them. And it's not always healthy because it is one of the reasons we don't hear the alarm as loud as we could. But, that said, at this point, there's almost no way to overstate the problem that we're in.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that we need now with this problem in particular, to be at a different place than we are As we start to wake up to the reality of climate change, as the weather forces us to grapple with it. As it becomes visible and in our faces, we're going to need to move very quickly to have any chance of doing anything about it. One of the things that all of us who started to work on this a long time ago have to restrain ourselves from saying some of the time, is "if you had only listened to me then." Because there were a lot of things we could have done 25 years ago that would have put us on a different trajectory. We wouldn't have solved the problem by now but we would be well on the way to solving it. Colorado would be entirely powered by windmills and we'd be making some real progress. We didn't and so now the choices we have are much starker and we have to move much more quickly and dramatically, and that's what the math means.

But that's not at the moment anyway how journalistic culture or political culture is treating the problem. They're still at the stage, with a kind of new-found zeal, of applauding any politician who is willing to acknowledge that global warming exists, you know? President Obama said something about it in his

inaugural address and there were all kinds of pundits . . . well of course he said something about it. What Winston Churchill had given a talk in 1943 and not mentioned that there was a war underway? Well of course he did mention it. And he really shouldn't get big points for doing it. The first President Bush, in 1988, running for president, said, "I will fight the Greenhouse Effect with the White House effect." It was the best line – he didn't predictable really mean it – but it was the best line about any of this that any president's delivered. That was the bar in 1988, it can't be the bar in 2013. Because the Arctic's melted in the meantime.

We have to things that we shouldn't have to do. And I find myself doing things that are extraordinary foreign to me. Two years ago I organized what became the largest civil-disobedience action in 30 years in this country. We sent 1,250 people to jail over the course of two weeks in Washington. I got to spend three days in Central Cellblock in D.C., which is as much fun as it sounds it would be. And we had to do that because nobody had heard of this enormous pipeline from the tar sands of Canada that was making its way down across the country. Didn't understand that it connected to a field of carbon so vast that if you were able to burn the recoverable oil in this one place in Canada the atmosphere concentration would rise from its current 395 parts per million – already too high – to 540 parts per million. That's the kind of thing that we *should* know. If we were dealing with the reality of the world around us it is the thing that people would have at their fingertips, but nobody was covering it. And so we had to do that. And I knew enough about . . . my one strategic insight because I had spent my life in journalism – was to know in fact how we should organize it and not to do it in one day but to do it over two weeks because I knew it would take five or six or seven days before any journalist would even begin to understand it was going on and show up or whatever else and that is exactly what it did take. It wasn't under the 13th or 14th day that NPR and people started to appear. And in the meantime, we had to do all the media ourselves. Which was OK.

Twitter; "media we make ourselves" is helping

And here's the other thing I want to say to give some heart to everybody. There's now this pretty robust media that we make ourselves. And it does a better job a lot of times then whatever the real media or whatever we call it, the one that people get paid to produce. If you want to understand climate change, following a good Twitter feed would actually be more useful than watching the evening news or whatever else. You'd have a better sense. And it's a way that we have been able to organize and spread the news. That's how we spread the news about the Keystone Pipeline for several months because it wasn't being written about. And until eventually we broke it through, and now it gets written about almost more than it should because there's a lot of other things going on that are on a kind of similar scale.

We opened the Arctic to oil drilling last summer. How insane is that? We've melted the Arctic and our response to it was, "Oh, good, now we can go drill for more oil up there." That's craziness! But no one really noted it as craziness at the time. It wasn't really treated much by our press as the kind of enormous irony that it is. But, only in these kind of other kind of niches and corners of our journalistic world. The good thing about that kind of journalism, that kind of guerilla journalism, that kind of home-made, do-it-yourself journalism, is that it's extraordinarily cheap to do. And we've been able to, lots of us in lots of different places, figure out how to do it. And there are powerful web sites and great bloggers now and places that are kind of beginning a balance between the old and the new journalism. I mean if you really want to understand the environmental stuff, you go to Grist.org everyday and track what's going on and they do a Cracker Jack job.

The best, at the moment, is when you have this strange synergy of old and new. When you write a piece for *Rolling Stone* because it is in a place that has a kind of recognizable masthead and credibility, but now it can also circulate online, how you've got millions of people who can read it and it can be explosive. "Viralness" is really a new thing in a lot of ways for journalism. It's been a long time since things were capable of going viral in quite that way. In a certain sense it is sort of back to Charles Dickens, or something, the last time with the capacity for things to happen. And that's good, because as I began by saying, and I'll end by saying, the biggest problem, the biggest dynamic here is that we are up to such a concentration of wealth that it's basically been able to prevent reason from prevailing. That's why we don't get any progress on climate change. That's why, it's why even one of Colorado's two senators voted last week to endorse the Keystone pipeline. Because there's a lot of money. That's why we have a hard time convincing universities to divest their fossil fuel stock. Although how four universities now have. And more and more all the time. And the fight's as important as the finish in this case but we just have to have this big, recognized battle going on all over the country.

Best journalism stands up to money

But finding out ways, without much money, to be able to stand up to large amounts of money, is in a certain sense what the best journalism has been about almost from the beginning. It's figuring out how to take power and status quo and put reality in its face and knock it down a peg or two. And so I'm more comfortable than I was when I started with journalism and movements being part of, you know, being intertwined. It's the natural outcome of good journalism, is to make people care, go do something about something. Especially when the stakes are as clear cut and obvious as they are here. When what's at issue is the future of the planet, the one planet that we have to deal with. A planet that is now under real siege.

One of the things that people ask me all the time is whether I'm optimistic or pessimistic about what's going to happen. And the trust is I've long since given up being either one. I really don't know how it's going to come out and I don't even think about it that much. It seems like the job is to get up every day and do as much as one can about it, you know? Whereever you are put in the kind of oar that you can. I think that I was right 25 years ago that this was the story of our time, maybe of all time, and it will repay endless telling and investigation and it should keep endless numbers of journalists busy for their entire careers understanding its permutations and implications.

But at bottom, it gets down to very basic moral questions. And those questions about whether or not we care enough about the future to interrupt the present and do something about it – whether we care enough about the future to sell the fossil-fuel stock. Whether we care enough about the future to put a price on carbon. All those things. Those are questions that need to be posed, that need to be pointed from over and over and over again.

Significance should trump immediacy

The final reason that journalists have a hard time with climate change is that after a certain point there is not a lot of novelty to it, and novelty is what journalists unfortunately, and especially in recent times, have tended to thrive on. In this case, significance is going to have to supplant as the reason that we deal with this issue. That come back to it over and over and over again. That we make it – figure out ways to make it – a focus of our work over and over again. Because its significance is so overwhelming, the stakes are so high that really we won't just know whether . . . we'll find out whether in a sense whether the big brain was a good adaptation or not in the next 30 or 40 years – find out whether it can get us out of trouble or not.

But we'll also find out whether the journalistic method was a good idea or not – whether it really works or not. Whether it serves the early-warning function we need it to serve or not. In the same way that we found out about how good our military was when it was time to fight World War II. Now we'll find out how good our journalism is because we're fighting a war for understand that the stakes and the scale and the pace are absolutely crucial. And those are things we haven't gotten across and we do have to figure out how to get across.

So there I am. Thank you again for your generosity and thank you all for your work.