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Seeking Reality On Climate

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Former Vice President Al Gore and organizers of the [Climate Reality Project](#) should be commended for building a worldwide forum on human-driven climate change over the past 24 hours. I've had a chance to dip in a few times and there were some useful discussions amid more predictable efforts to cast the climate challenge as an us-versus-them problem (to my mind it's much more an [us-versus-us problem](#)). The organizers reported more than 6 million views as of late afternoon.

Will this effort silence or sideline professional naysayers/deniers/skeptics and the many people who, for all kinds of reasons unrelated to money, reject calls to make cutting greenhouses a prime priority?

I doubt it. Our polarized politics and buffet-style media menu — in which anyone with a strongly held position can validate it with the touch of a remote control or mouse — guarantee persistent, even sharpening, divisions on greenhouse gases.

Will the project entice those not already engaged to seek reality on climate science? I doubt that, too. The effort to cast the climate challenge as green-energy Davids versus fossil-fueled Goliaths has come with substantial oversimplification. Extreme weather is our fault. Period. As Gore put it in a promotional video:

Across the globe, cataclysmic weather events are occurring with such regularity that it is being called a 'new normal.' But there is nothing normal about it.

Just last year, climate scientists met in Paris to discuss the big persistent gaps in efforts to understand [the impact of greenhouse warming on extreme weather](#). How does that square with the brisk depictions of human-triggered calamity in this Web event?

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There was another problem with the Web-athon — the mixing of basic science with policy prescriptions. It's hard to see disengaged citizens swayed by a conversation that, in one instance this afternoon, swung from discussions of greenhouse physics by [NASA's Drew Shindell](#) to [Tara DePorte of the Human Impacts Institute](#) saying, "We need strong global governance."

This is the same trap that climate campaigners, and some climate scientists, have fallen into for years, to my mind — mashing up climate science and pre-selected energy solutions in one conversation, sometimes a single sentence. [Read climate scientist [Ken Caldeira's thoughts on this habit here.](#)]

There are ways to discuss both climate science and energy and pollution policy cogently and constructively. But this requires parsing if the goal is engagement and not deeper divisions.

DePorte runs a creditable organization and Shindell is an excellent climate researcher. But their points belong in two different, albeit related, conversations. Each merits its own 24 hours of reality. I'd hoped President Obama would [pick up on the opportunity to engage the public in such a discourse.](#)

In the meantime, another reality was largely unmentioned. The world remains deeply wedded to fossil fuels.

While the Climate Reality Project Web site ticker was passing 5,256,000 million viewers (video above), the coal-sales ticker on [the home page of Peabody Energy](#), the world's largest coal company, was spinning past 179 million tons of coal sold in 2011.