I've been asked to talk a little about the U.S. media and the U.S. perspective on climate change. Now, as a journalist, I'm trained to be skeptical of what might be called transformational moments—too often, when it comes to energy or environmentalism, we've been told that a revolution is just around the corner, only to be disappointed again and again. It's now 17 years since the Earth Summit met in Rio de Janeiro, and more than a decade since the Kyoto Protocol was signed, and yet change in the way we use energy has been, for the most part, on the margins. Our global carbon emissions keep rising—and we spend more time talking about climate change than doing anything about it.

But the hope now is that we may finally be on the threshold of a real climate revolution—supposedly thanks to political change in my home country, the United States. As anyone who has attended the UN climate talks over the past eight years well knows, the constant intransigeience of the Bush White House made progress all but impossible. The Bush Administration's officials, refusing to act on the science of climate change, were passive observers at best during the summits and active spoilsports at worst—as their behavior in the final hours of the Bali summit in 2007 made clear. It often seemed as if they were negotiating for a no. The Bush Administration's missing in action negotiating style gave tacit permission to other nations to sidestep the hard work of addressing carbon emissions and global warming. Why do anything if the world's number one carbon emitter remained on the sidelines? Domestically, within the U.S. itself, the knowledge that President Bush would surely veto legislation that attempted to cap American carbon emissions sapped the momentum from any effort in Congress. Another four years of that style of governing might have been enough to doom international efforts to combat global warming—at the very moment when our scientists were ringing the alarm louder than ever before.

But you may have heard: change has come to America. In President Barack Obama, Americans elected a leader who believes in the facts of climate change, who treats science and its practioners with respect, who came into office saying that a new energy program was one of his top legislative priorities. At the Global Climate Summit in Los Angeles last Novemeber, just two weeks after he was elected, President Obama sent a

message : “Few challenges facing America -- and the world -- are more urgent than combating climate change. Many of you are working to confront this challenge....but too often, Washington has failed to show the same kind of leadership. That will change when I take office." He put into place the greenest cabinet in U.S. history, with staff like Secretary of Energy Steven Chu, the Nobel Prize winning physicist, and Harvard’s John Holdren as White House science advisor. Environmentaists had reason to believe that a green revolution was finally at hand in America.

Nearly a year later, has President Obama been true to his word? His State Department, under Secretary Hillary Clinton, has identified climate change as a key priority for American diplomacy. Todd Stern, the State Department’s climate envoy, has reached out to nations like China and India, to find common ground over an issue that matters to both North and South. That has to be seen as progress—this Adminstration is not afraid to put carbon on the negotiating table. At home the White House has increased automobile fuel efficiency standards—albeit still well below European or Japanese levels—has taken on the coal industry and has channeled billions of dollars of stimulus funding into green projects.

Change came to Congress as well. It didn’t gain the global notice of President Obama’s victory, but when California Congressman Henry Waxman successfully challenged longtime Michigan incumbent John Dingell for the chairmanship of the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee, it may have been even more important for climate change politics. A longtime ally of the Detroit automakers, Dingell was in a position to strangle any meaningful legislation to cap carbon emissions in the U.S. Waxman, on the other hand, represents Los Angeles, and is one of the greenest members of Congress. He pledged to use his chairmanship to immediately push forward a carbon cap and trade bill.

Waxman was true to his word—by May he and his colleague Edward Markey of Massachusetts had hammered out the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009, which would finally put a declining cap on U.S. carbon emissions between now and 2050. With a great deal of political back and forth, that bill managed to pass the Houe of

Representatives—though only by a few nail-biting votes. Of course, that was the easy part—next comes the vote in the more conservative U.S. Senate, where any bill will need 60 votes out of 100 members to pass. Democratic Senators Barbara Boxer of California and John Kerry of Massachusetts are just this week in the process of holding hearings for their version of a cap and trade bill—similar to the one put forward by Waxman and Markey, albeit with a slightly tighter carbon cap in the short term.

All of this will have resonance internationally. The U.S. Senate needs to accept any international climate treaty, so America will have little leverage at the talks until Congress shows that it can live with carbon reductions at home. President Obama has made it very clear that he will not repeat what he sees as the mistakes of the Kyoto Protocol, when the Clinton Administration agreed to global carbon cuts at the COP summit, only to see the treaty decisively repudiated in a 95-0 vote in the U.S. Senate, and then finally dropped by President Bush shortly after he took office. Obama's team is very unlikely to agree at Copenhagen to any carbon cuts that the Senate won't support at home. The cap and trade bills making their way through Congress should give the U.S. room to negotiate internationally.

So does that mean it's clear sailing from here to Copenhagen? I wish that were the case. That's because far from being poised to finally lead on climate change, there's a risk that the U.S. could see a backlash against global warming policies at home. While the people in power in Washington have changed over the past year, the political realities they need to contend with at home and abroad have not. If anything, the climate for action on global warming in the U.S. today—and I mean measureable and verifiable acton, not just rheteoric—is not much better than it was during most of the Bush Administration. If the U.S. is truly to lead in Copenhagen, it will require the most of President Obama: and I'm not sure that he, or anyone else in his White House or the Congress is truly up to it.

And neither, possibility is the American public. There's been a notable backslide in public concern over global warming in the U.S. We assumed that after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's groundbreaking assessment in 2007, the

scientific case on global warming was definitively closed. I certainly wrote that, and I imagine so did many of you. But not every American has heard the message. A poll released last week by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center found that just 57% of Americans polled believe that the Earth is actually getting warmer—down from 71% in a similar poll held in April 2008. Incredibly, just 37% of Americans say that the Earth is getting warmer due to the burning of fossil fuels and other manmade causes—down from 47% last year. And altogether just 35% of Americans believe climate change is a very serious problem, down from 44%.

Admittedly, that's just one poll, but for environmental advocates in the U.S.—and those who are counting on America to lead on climate change—it is a damning one. During the very same time period when Americans elected officials who said they would combat global warming, concern over the problem—even belief in the basic science of climate change—has declined. Other polls of Americans have shown that when it comes to ranking the problems the U.S. faces, climate change and other environmental issues consistently come out near the bottom, after the economy, terrorism, health care and other issues.

There are a number of reasons for this. The global recession, of course, has drained attention away from climate change and virtually every other issue. Where in boom times Americans might have felt they had the luxury of worrying about the future, now, with unemployment hovering near 10%, the focus shifts to the present day costs of dealing with climate change. Also, much more so in the U.S. than in most other countries, climate change and the environment in general remain charged, divided by political party at a time when the public as a whole has become polarized as never before. Looking back at that Pew poll, the vast majority of Democrats still believe in climate change, and still believe it is a very serious problem. Among Republicans, though, that figure is tiny. There had been hope in the past that global warming could be viewed as a bipartisan problem that could win bipartisan, national solutions—in the 2008 President election, both Obama and the Republican candidate Sen. John McCain spoke of the threat of climate change and the need to institute carbon caps. Sen. McCain, before he ran for

President, even co-sponsored the first cap and trade bill in the Senate. But that was then—today Republicans and Democrats seem more interested in destroying each other than actually addressing the problems that face the country.

But the U.S. media plays a role in this change as well—and not one I'm happy to report. Increasingly, climate change isn't found on the front page of U.S. newspapers, and even more rarely on TV news. A little example: I attended the annual meeting for the American Association for the Advancement of Science this February in Chicago. Global warming was topic number one there—former Vice President Al Gore even gave the keynote speech. But I was struck by how few American journalists made the trip, and not just because our media companies seem to be in danger of imminent liquidation; European journalists, by contrast, were all over the place. The same is true of virtually every major environmental or climate change conference—surprisingly little participation from the U.S. media, even as international journalists cover it closely.

Some of this has to be put to the implosion of the media business in the U.S. Advertising pages are down and down some more; papers are laying off staff or closing altogether, TV news bureaus are dwindling. Not long ago CNN, a corporate partner of Time Inc., eliminated virtually its entire science news section. Columbia University in New York, which has the best graduate institution for reporting in the U.S., just closed its prestigious environmental journalism program. The reason was startk—too few jobs for its graduates. If it's a difficult time for journalists in America, it's an even harder time to be a journalist covering the environment.

Even in these tough times, however, there are still outlets dedicated to covering the climate. The New York Times churns out great and varied coverage on global warming to a degree that is outright intimidating for a competitor. National Public Radio, the closest thing the U.S. has to a fair-minded BBC, also covers global warming well—with a particular focus on the international picture. As for my magazine, Time, I feel fortunate that we still keep a full-time environmental correspondent, and put green issues on the cover—though perhaps not as regularly as I'd prefer. And the growth of the Internet has

enabled new media to focus minutely on climate change to a far deeper level than the mainstream media ever could—I'm thinking of websites like the Seattle-based Grist.org, or the great scientific site RealClimate.

But on the whole mainstream media in the U.S. has let climate change slip, even as we barrel toward Copenhagen. And I think much of the reason can be found in the general retreat of the U.S. media from international news. Foreign bureaus close, and time dedicated to international news on TV or cable dwindles, in favor of more political or celebrity coverage—not that the two can always be told apart. Global warming is a global story, perhaps the most global one of all, and the mainstream U.S. media, with a few exceptions, is increasingly less interested in investing the time and money needed to cover global stories. And if you believe the results of the Pew poll, that doesn't bother many Americans.

But who's at fault here—Americans for not caring enough about global warming, or the U.S. media for not making them care? Many environmentalists believe it is our fault—that if the mainstream U.S media simply reported the truth about global warming, the American public would fall in line and support strong action on climate change. Perhaps—and certainly there have been times, especially in the past, where knee-jerk objectiveness has led the media to give too much weight to global warming deniers, muddying up the picture. Certainly we could have treated global warming less as a story to be kept in the environmental section, trotted out every Earth Day, and integrated it into our coverage of politics, business and technology. And with the growth of more partisan outlets like Fox News, where you're not likely to see hard-hitting climate coverage, Americans who are naturally skeptical of climate change can easily find coverage that fits their prejudices.

But as the debate over climate change even in the U.S. has shifted from science to economics, from predicting global warming to predicting how much it will cost, I'm less sure that the blame for American apathy can be laid entirely at the feet of the media. The truth is that the U.S. is a large, varied and diverse country—and the costs of combating

climate change, most likely through a cap and trade system, will vary greatly throughout the country. The most recent projections from the federal government estimate that a cap and trade program will cost the average American family about $100 a year. Not a bad bill to dave the planet, you might think. But that figure will likely vary greatly depending on where you live. For those in California—with its easy climate, clean tech industries and forward thinking energy policies—accepting a carbon cap should be a snap. The same in Massachusetts—and it's little surprise that the congressional representatives leading the charge on cap and trade hail from these states. But for the American Midwest and Southeast—dependent on polluting coal and heavy industry—the costs of cap and trade will be much heavier.

That's simply a reality, and I think it explains why such a large number of Americans are suspicious about global warming and fearful of the economic effects of trying to stop it. We've already seen that dynamic play out in the Congressional debates over cap and trade, where the hardest votes to get have been Democrats who hail from the South and the Midwest. (The Republicans have pretty much checked out.) In the House, Waxman and Markey bent over backwards to assuage the concerns of their Democratic colleagues, watering down the cap in their cap and trade, giving free allowances to polluting industries—and they still barely managed to get the bill passed. In the more conservative Senate, where the bar is much higher, that will be even tougher. Democrats still remember former President Clinton's attempt to pass a tax on the BTU content of fuels 1993, a sort of proto carbon tax. Though the unpopular bill died in Congress after Clinton dropped support, the Democrats who voted yes paid for their support at the polls the following year. With midterm elections around the corner, no one wants a repeat of 1994, when the Democrats lost control of Congress, and no one's eager to stick their neck out too far.

And under all of this debate lies a fear in the U.S. public—a fear of the rest of the world. To developing nations, as Sunita Narain put it eloquently, global warming is a question first and foremost of justice. Developed nations, led by the U.S. got rich off industrializing and putting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Now that science

demands that we curtail those emissions as soon as possible, it only seems just that rich nations would act first and act aggressively. Certainly that's the formula enshrined in the UNFCCC, and other rich nations followed under Kyoto: Japan, Canada, the European Union.

But it's never worked in the U.S. Under President George W. Bush, there was never a chance—a climate change skeptic at best, the issue of developing nations responsibilities was a convenient way to delay any global action on warming. The truth is, however, President Obama's take may not be that different. While the U.S. is willing to move forward on carbon caps—provided the Senate will go along—we still hear the Obama Administration emphasizing the need for developing nations to act as well. We won't hear him trying to convince Americans that we have used up more than our fair share of the atmosphere, and that we must accept deep carbon cuts now. Even if the Waxman Markey bill were to be passed into law without any further changes, U.S. carbon cuts by 2020 would be relatively small—hardly more than if we had signed up for Kyoto in the first place. Yet I can't see further cuts being politically possible even in the best environment—the fear that jobs and investment would leak into developing nations like China and India is simply too strong. Many Americans view these nations as active economic competitors. Republicans are already gearing up for the 2010 Congresssional elections, and will surely use the supposed economics costs of cap and trade as a weapon against Obama—and if the polls are true, I'm not sure how the Democrats will defend themselves.

In any case, it's extremely unlikely that cap and trade will pass the Senate before the Copenhagen summit—which means we could see yet another unguided American delegation, standing on the sidelines. I wish I had better news—but I just don't see it.

In the meantime, it's imperative for the U.S. media to keep reporting hard on climate change—and better focus on the true impacts of warming, at home and abroad. Over the last couple of years, we've seen the emphasis shift from the frightening effects of climate change in the future, to the promise of a new energy economy. When President Obama

talks about climate change, he doesn't talk about climate change—he emphasizes the new jobs that will come out of the renewable energy sector, the benefits of getting off foreign oil. I've seen the same shift in the media—I've written far more business stories about new forms of solar power or biofuels than pure science pieces over the past year. That shift is neccesary important—climate change really does represent the biggest economic oppourtunity of the 21st century—but I worry it makes climate change seem almost optional, as if controlling carbon emissions is just one more business tool. We all know that it is far more than that. Global warming remains crisis number one for the planet, and especially for those who live in developing nations, who will suffer the most in a warmer world. The U.S. media needs to remind our audience of that, again again. We need to make them see what global warming will do to the poor of Bangladesh, to those already living on the edge of sub-Saharan Africa. We need to make them see what will happen to wildlife around the planet as the temperature rises and tropical forests are stripped from the land. We need to make them see what will happen if the glaciers of the Himalayas, disrupting water supplies for billions in Asia. That's why the dialogue fostered by this conference is so important—if the American public can see the impacts of global warming through the eyes of the rest of the world, maybe we could see a real shift in opinion—and with it, the politics. Otherwise I fear the world could be kept hostage to U.S. domestic politics until the ice caps melt.