

Talking about a revolution: climate change and the media

An IIED Briefing

Mike Shanahan

The paper reviews how the media reports on, and what people think about, climate change in different parts of the world. The issue has never been higher on the media's agenda, yet problems persist in the way it is reported. While the media is not entirely to blame, it can do much to improve its telling of climate change stories.

KEY POINTS:

- There are many criticisms of how the media has covered climate change to date, but many signs of improvement too. For journalists new to the topic, climate change is complex, making training a priority for media outlets.
- The false balance that has been a problem for years appears to be declining but a catastrophe narrative that disempowers people remains. Those supplying the media with information – scientists, politicians and NGOs – share some of the blame. The way they and the media frame climate change will affect how audiences respond.
- Challenges include making stories more relevant to audiences, raising the profile of adaptation and the perspectives of the poor, and reporting on ways to address climate change that bring additional benefits.

The science and the story of our times

Two years before Hurricane Katrina tore across New Orleans, *Washington Post* reporter Mike Tidwell predicted that just such a disaster would strike the city. While no single event can be blamed on climate change, the science suggests that intense cyclones like Katrina will become more common as the planet heats up. The science tells us that climate change is the greatest threat humanity has ever faced. Surely then the media has never had a greater role to play. But one year after Katrina, concerned at the media's potential to make a difference, Tidwell declared: "A revolution is needed and journalists don't make revolutions."

This article asks why. It is based on recent media studies and opinion polls from across the globe. It reveals problems with the media's coverage of climate change to date, as well as reasons for hope. But the science also says time is running out. It says we urgently need a fair and effective global response – and local action by business and individuals in all countries. The media and those it relies on for information still need to raise their game if they are to meet the challenge of telling the story of our times.

David King, the UK government's chief scientific advisor, said climate change is a greater threat than global terrorism, while Nobel Laureate Al Gore equates the need for collective action to that posed by the rise of fascism in the 20th Century. But governments, businesses and people are hardly on a war footing – nor is the media. As recently as November 2007, journalist

Chris Mooney was tracking Cyclone Sidr on his blog some days before it struck Bangladesh. But as he pointed out, there was scant international media coverage of the impending disaster.

True, climate change's media profile has never been higher, and public awareness is rising fast worldwide. But in most nations, coverage of sport, celebrities, politics, the economy and crime dwarfs that of climate change. Polls show that public understanding of the subject is still low, and public action lower still. Nor does the news reach all people equally. According to research by communications consultancy Futerra, in August to November 2005, the highbrow *Financial Times* (circulation: 450,000) had 23 per cent of climate-change stories in UK newspapers, while the *Sun* (circulation: 3.1 million) had just 1.5 per cent.

In parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America the quality and quantity of climate change articles are growing fast in the newspapers read by wealthier urban people, but there little research available on how much information is reaching the poorer communities. James Painter at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has looked at this question. He showed that the prime-time evening news on the main TV stations in China, India, Mexico, Russia and South Africa made no mention of the IPCC report on mitigation when it was released in May 2007.

Grasping the fundamentals

In poorer countries especially, few reporters are well trained, connected and resourced for the challenge ahead. Globally, apart from a few journalists who have been covering climate change for years, the media has been slow off the mark. Climate change used to be 'just' a science/environment story – never the best funded news desks. And many senior editors are arts graduates, who are unwilling or unable to understand science. But climate change now encompasses the economy, health, security and more. Suddenly science reporters are covering a political issue and vice versa. For many, the topic is new, extremely complex, and easy to get wrong.

Writing in November 2007, Richard Black and Roger Harrabin (who report on climate change for the BBC) told fellow journalists how important it was for them to catch up: "If we do not have a strong grasp of the fundamentals of the climate debate we risk presenting our audiences with a set of opinions which is out-dated, driven by spin or simply wrong." Such a grasp has often been lacking and this has contributed to a big problem: false balance.

Evidence and emotion

On 25 October 2007, more than a million London commuters read the free *Metro* newspaper. The headline on page 4 screamed: “We’re in the biggest race of our lives”. The story was about the UN Environment Programme’s GEO-4 report, which said action on climate change and other issues was woefully inadequate. But instead of quoting a qualified scientist, *Metro* quoted the children’s TV presenter and ‘global warming cynic’ Johnny Ball, who cast doubt on the need to address climate change.

The scientific consensus

“Many leading experts still question if human activity is contributing to climate change,” agreed 56 per cent of those interviewed by pollsters IPSOS/Mori in the UK in 2007. Yet there has been a strong scientific consensus that humans influence climate since 1995, represented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the 2,000+ researchers most qualified to comment. In 2007 the IPCC gave its strongest statement yet on climate change. It said human activities were more than 90 per cent likely to be the cause and that impacts could be “abrupt and irreversible”. It added that if urgent steps are taken, climate change could be addressed at reasonable cost. Nearly 200 nations (including, some would be surprised to learn, the United States) have endorsed the IPCC findings. They are based on thousands of published, peer-reviewed studies. For the scientists, the broad arguments about the reality of climate change are over. The media is still catching up.

This is one of many examples of journalistic balance gone wrong. It arises from the media’s need to appear unbiased and tell a story from two sides. And in news terms, conflict sells more than consensus. For years, journalists have been ‘balancing’ science with scepticism, offsetting evidence with emotion. By ignoring the overwhelming scientific consensus (see ‘The scientific consensus’), this effectively instills bias. It serves to confuse and misinform the public and has helped to delay action to address climate change.

Something sinister contributed to this failure. Companies and politicians with vested interests in maintaining the status quo have tried to undermine science and subvert journalism. In doing so, they have eroded public confidence in either. Some of climate-change journalism’s top stories have ‘followed the money’ and exposed these interests (see ‘Upsetting the balance’).

This helped lead to a big shift in climate-change reporting in the US – whose stance on climate change has stalled international action for a decade. Research published in November 2007 by Maxwell Boykoff at the University of Oxford, UK, shows that the majority of US newspaper articles from 1990 to 2004 balanced the view that humans cause climate change with the opposite viewpoint. The good news, he says, is that by 2005 this trend had ended. “While this provides some cause for optimism that media reporting may act as a stronger catalyst for more decisive climate-policy action,” he wrote, “many other challenges remain in ensuring climate science informs climate-decision making.” Among them, is the way climate-change stories are framed.

From denial to despair... to action

Research suggests that complex messages like those on climate change will resonate more with people if they are ‘framed’ to suit diverse audiences – that is told with a strong focus on a certain aspect of the story. The ‘scientific uncertainty’ frame struck a chord with people who don’t want to change, while the “national security” frame might inspire action from the same individuals.

Upsetting the balance

False balance has been most evident in the US, where pollster Frank Luntz famously advised George W. Bush’s Republican Party to “make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate”. In 2005, *The New York Times* revealed that a key Bush aide had edited the US Climate Change Science Program report in a way that exaggerated scientific uncertainties. In 2006, the UK scientific academy, the Royal Society accused the giant oil company, ExxonMobil, of funding groups that attempt to undermine the scientific consensus on climate change. Months later, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that a lobby group funded by ExxonMobil offered scientists and economists US\$10,000 plus expenses for articles that would dispute the February 2007 IPCC report’s findings.

The ‘polar bear’ frame appeals most to animal lovers, while the ‘money’ frame will chime with politicians and the private sector (see ‘Polar bears and pound signs’).

But among the most common frames is one that inspires inaction: the ‘catastrophe’ frame. James Painter looked at how the main TV stations in Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Russia and South Africa covered two of the IPCC’s reports in 2007. The first, ‘negative’ report on the impacts of climate change was covered by more stations and in more detail than that the second ‘more positive’ report on tackling greenhouse gas emissions.

In research published in 2006 by Futerra, only 25 per cent of climate change stories in UK newspapers were positive – focused more on solutions than problems. Later that year, the UK Institute for Public Policy Research identified two main ways the media, government and green groups were framing climate change: Alarmism (we’re all going to die) and Small Actions (I’m doing my bit for the planet – and maybe my pocket). It concluded that these narratives are “confusing, contradictory and chaotic, with the likely result that the public feels disempowered and uncompelled to act”.

Polar bears and pound signs

How many people have ever seen a polar bear or would miss it if it went extinct? Environmental groups have long used the polar bear to symbolise climate change, but does this really connect with people? We have been hearing for decades that tigers and orang-utans are on the brink of extinction but they are in a worse state than ever. And there are not decades left to get messages on climate change through.

This underscores the need for journalists to think imaginatively when proposing stories to their editors. The polar bear’s prospects might be less bleak if the discourse focused more on what climate change means for the price of wheat or maize or rice. This is the money frame – the costs and benefits of action and inaction. It is notable that in Futerra’s study of UK newspapers, the *Financial Times* had both most coverage of climate change and the most positive stories. As tackling climate change is increasingly portrayed as a business opportunity, many companies are acting faster than governments.

One of the biggest boosts to public and media awareness of climate change worldwide was the 2006 UK government publication of the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change. It said climate change could shrink the global economy by 20 per cent, but that acting now to address climate change would cost only 1 per cent of global GDP. It has been criticised for having too low a discount rate, which essentially means being more concerned about future generations. For others, that adds to the Review’s appeal.

Mike Hulme, then director of the UK Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, later warned that: “the discourse of catastrophe is in danger of tipping society onto a negative, depressive and reactionary trajectory.”

What are the alternatives? One is to focus more on the solutions to climate change and ways to adapt to its effects, and less on the frightening statistics – to move from denial and despair to action. Another is to connect in audiences’ minds the emissions in one place and impacts in another, and to share the voices and concerns of the poorest, most vulnerable people who have contributed least to the problem but will suffer most from its impacts.

It is legitimate to point out that while the future looks bleak, change is possible. As David King says: “It is doable, but we will have to bust a gut to make it happen.” While ‘catastrophe’ leaves people feeling helpless, the ‘justice and equity’ frame is empowering. “Most people in the climate change debate focus on how to cut emissions and how to bring the US, China and India into an agreement,” says Saleemul Huq, head of climate change at IIED. “Impacts of climate change on poor countries, and the responsibilities of rich nations to help them, get much less attention.”

Here then is a challenge for the media. If all greenhouse gas emissions stopped this second, there would still be plenty of climate change in store, because of lags in the Earth-atmosphere system. The most vulnerable communities must adapt, and they need financial support to do this. But this aspect of climate change is underreported. The voices of the vulnerable are rarely heard by those in power. In Painter’s study of TV coverage of the IPCC reports in the major emerging economies, such as Brazil, China and India, adaptation “received scant, if any, media attention” despite being mentioned in the title of the April 2007 report.

Mixed messages

Sharon Dunwoody of the University of Wisconsin-Madison says media messages about climate change “seem to change the behaviour of some of the people some of the time, but have almost no discernible effect on most people most of the time.”

Perhaps one reason for this is that while the media informs the public about climate change one minute, in the next it is advertising products or activities that increase greenhouse gas emissions. Journalist George Monbiot set out to examine this by measuring advertising for travel, car companies and polluting heavy industry in the UK’s main agenda-setting newspapers over 10 days in July 2007.

The most adverts were in *The Times*, with 42 pages’ worth (4.4 per cent of the newspaper) and the *Telegraph* with 30.5 pages (7.3 per cent). Monbiot asked each newspaper how much money they made from these ads. The only one that would say was the *Financial Times*. It devoted the least space to adverts (2.75 pages and 0.8 per cent of the paper) yet this accounted for 10.4 per cent of the paper’s income. Money talks. In the US, car and fuel companies have threatened to withdraw advertising from radio stations after they reported on climate change.

This should not be a surprise; nor should it be a given. Growing demand for green products and environmental news is creating a market for alternative media outlets that do not depend on revenue from polluters. If this demand grows sufficiently, the new information outlets could become a source or a challenge to the traditional media.

Reasons for hope

The media’s job is not to change the world. It is up to society to turn bad news into good. But the media does have a role to play in empowering people to make informed choices. Yet public, private and political reactions to climate change are still small relative to what powerful scientific, economic and moral arguments demand.

It has been said that the most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t being said. In the case of media coverage of climate change, that includes the urgency of adaptation, the costs of acting and failing to, the views of the poor, the vested interests that resist change, and the potential for action to address climate change to bring substantial co-benefits. There are plenty of good-news ‘win-win’ stories to tell, and plenty of ways to improve the way they are told and made relevant to diverse audiences.

The media is not entirely to blame. Scientists have long struggled to step outside their circle and this meant many resist telling their stories simply and without jargon – a turn-off for the public. Scientists need to be better at communicating about climate change and environmentalists need to stop focusing on catastrophe in their messages. Communicators can do much more to tailor their messages to audiences.

For journalists, the main issue is to grasp the complex nature of climate change as it continues to gather new dimensions. Training and access to experts will be key, especially for under-resourced reporters in the poorest countries. With a little time and training, non-scientific journalists can cover climate change well. They need not think it is beyond them. Internet-based sources are becoming increasingly important – and accessible to journalists around the world (see Sources). The emerging role of some of these sites came to the fore in November 2007, when bloggers rapidly exposed climate change hoax that had tricked some sectors of the media (see ‘Bloggers to the rescue’).

Bloggers to the rescue

It must have been music to the ears of the conservative US chat-show host Rush Limbaugh and his millions of listeners. In November 2007, researchers proved that humans were not causing climate change. Rather than fossil fuel burning it was the previously undetected emissions from undersea bacteria that were responsible for the last 140 years’ increase in atmospheric concentrations. Limbaugh and others in the media – including 600 radio stations in the United States – duly spread the word before realising they had been tricked. Hoaxers had created a fake scientific journal, with a fake editorial board, website and authors.

Unlike earlier efforts to confuse the media, this did not originate with an industry lobby group. But before the hoax had time to infect, bloggers identified a suspect called David Thorpe, who later said it was unleashed to expose the willingness of climate sceptics to believe anything that supports their argument. Bloggers helped to stop this hoax in its tracks – before it was widely reported.

New York Times journalist Andy Revkin said this shows “the amazing power of the Web to amplify, and then dismantle, fictions at light speed.” And while few media outlets were tricked, the blogger Gaius warned: “This sort of thing will probably become more common – and more sophisticated.”

Detailed studies of media coverage of climate change that are underway in China, India, Mexico, Vietnam and other nations should reveal much about how journalists there are reporting this

story, and how this affects the public. One encouraging sign came in 2007, when international banking giant HSBC looked at public attitudes to climate change in Brazil, China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Mexico, the UK and US. It found that “it is in the developing economies that people show the greatest concern, commitment and optimism, and in the developed economies that people show the greatest indifference, reluctance and fatalism.”

The end of the story

Mike Tidwell is not the only one to invoke revolution. When the IPCC published its February report, French President Jacques Chirac said: “Faced with this emergency, the time is not for half-measures. The time is for a revolution: a revolution of our awareness, a revolution of the economy, a revolution of political action.”

In September 2007, Björn Stigson, head of the Geneva-based World Business Council for Sustainable Development, warned that to tackle climate change, we need a revolution of society on a scale never witnessed in peacetime. “It will probably get worse before it gets better, before governments feel they’ve got the political mandate to act,” he told the *Financial Times*. “We’re going to have to go into some sort of crisis before it’s going to be resolved. I don’t think people have realised the challenge. This is more serious than what people think.”

The science tells us that a window of opportunity is about to slam shut on our collective fingers. The head of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change says there are just two years left to negotiate a stronger, fairer global agreement on how to address climate change. Massive shifts in policy and in public behaviour will be necessary to keep greenhouse gas concentrations below a dangerous level and to adapt to the changes that are already inevitable. The media and those it relies on for information will play an increasing role in whether or not a revolution happens and how it plays out if it does. The good news is that the climate is not the only thing that is changing.

Sources:

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE MEDIA

- Futerra. 2006. Climate Fear v Climate Hope. Are the UK’s national newspapers helping tackle climate change? (www.tinyurl.com/2jtapg)
- Boykoff, M. 2007. Flogging a dead norm? Newspaper coverage of anthropogenic climate change in the United States and United Kingdom from 2003-2006. *Area* 39. (www.tinyurl.com/2vjjuul)
- Boykoff M. and Boykoff, J. 2007. Climate Change and Journalistic Norms: A Case-study of U.S. Mass-media Coverage. *Geoforum* in press. (www.tinyurl.com/2uk3mo)
- Carbonundrums. 2007. This includes Powerpoint presentations and podcasts on climate change reporting in Africa, Australia, China, Brazil, Mexico, the UK, and the US (www.tinyurl.com/2kuw6b)
- BBC’s Black and Harrabin on reporting on climate change (www.tinyurl.com/2fd54u)
- Painter, J. 2007. All doom and gloom? International TV coverage of the April and May 2007 IPCC reports. (www.tinyurl.com/2qd7ky).
- Panos London. 2006. Whatever the weather. Media attitudes to reporting climate change. (www.tinyurl.com/2cp86g)
- IPPR. 2006. Warm Words: How are we telling the climate story and can we tell it better? (www.tinyurl.com/2cp86g)
- Monbiot. G. 2007. The editorials urge us to cut emissions, but the ads tell a very different story. *The Guardian*. (www.tinyurl.com/yqr6gp)

- Lowe. T. 2006. Is this climate porn? Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. Working Paper 98. (www.tinyurl.com/2chbft)
- Tolan. S. 2007. Coverage of climate change in Chinese media. UNDP. (www.tinyurl.com/yscm7v)

OPINION POLLS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

- Nisbet, M.C. & Myers, T. 2007. Twenty years of public opinion about global warming. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 71, 444-470. (www.tinyurl.com/2nygz9)
- HSBC Climate Confidence Index 2007 (www.tinyurl.com/yv58j5)
- IPSOS/Mori. 2007. Tipping point or turning point (www.tinyurl.com/2nx8cy)
- BBC World Service’s 2007 poll of attitudes in 21 countries (www.tinyurl.com/37skjo)
- Globescan 2006 poll of attitudes in 30 countries (www.tinyurl.com/2nhx2p)

CLIMATE CHANGE BLOGS

- DeSmog Blog (www.desmogblog.com)
- RealClimate (www.realclimate.org)
- Climate Feedback (www.tinyurl.com/yon3r)
- Climate Science Watch (www.climatewatch.org)
- Climate Ethics (www.climateethics.org)
- Climate Ark (www.climateark.org/blog)
- Prometheus (www.tinyurl.com/2mfblu)

CLIMATE CHANGE NEWS

- Andrew Revkin at *The New York Times* (www.tinyurl.com/2zsunw)
- BBC Climate Change (www.tinyurl.com/2zemzr)
- Fiona Harvey at the *Financial Times* (www.tinyurl.com/29ckyp)
- AllAfrica.com climate (www.allafrica.com/climate)
- Nature Reports - climate change (www.tinyurl.com/22ykye)
- Cicero (www.tinyurl.com/2bxw5j)
- SciDev.Net (www.scidev.net/climate)
- Tiempo Newswatch (www.tinyurl.com/ys43kd)
- Earth Negotiations Bulletin (www.tinyurl.com/2wk846)

FRAMING AND COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CHANGE

- Matthew Nisbet’s Framing Science blog (www.tinyurl.com/2otjj8)
- IPPR – Climate ‘porn’ turning people off from action (www.tinyurl.com/3atugd)
- Ankelohe Conversations 2006 (www.tinyurl.com/3cgqnl)
- Grist Magazine* (www.tinyurl.com/37wyec)
- Mike Hulme at OpenDemocracy (www.tinyurl.com/3dp29h)
- Mike Hulme at BBC Online (www.tinyurl.com/yyjmt8)
- Chris Mooney at Huffington Post (www.tinyurl.com/22uxfk)
- Creating a climate for change: communicating climate change and facilitating social change (www.tinyurl.com/39bbhz)
- Society of Environmental Journalists: guide to climate change (www.tinyurl.com/2xm475)
- Lisa Dilling and Susanne Moser. 2004. Making climate hot: communicating the urgency and challenge of global climate change (www.tinyurl.com/yrohxx)

ON CLIMATE SCEPTICS

- Grist Magazine* (www.gristmill.grist.org/sceptics)
- RealClimate Wiki (www.tinyurl.com/2xa68b)
- BBC (www.tinyurl.com/yrjvjo)
- The Guardian*: Scientists offered cash to dispute climate study (www.tinyurl.com/2kzqd7)

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) is an independent, nonprofit research institute working in the field of sustainable development. IIED provides expertise and leadership in researching and achieving sustainable development at local, national, regional and global levels. This opinion paper has been produced with the generous support of Danida (Denmark), DFID (UK), DGIS (the Netherlands), Irish Aid, Norad (Norway), SDC (Switzerland) and Sida (Sweden).

CONTACT:

Mike Shanahan (IIED)
email: mike.shanahan@iied.org
3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 7388 2117 Fax: +44 (0)20 7388 2826
Website: www.iied.org