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Too little, too late?

Media coverage of climate change around the world

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The scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned us two years ago that they were 90% sure that human activities were the cause of rising temperatures and that the impacts of climate change could be “abrupt and irreversible”.

We are told that this is the biggest challenge to face humanity in modern times. Governments now have just 25 days of negotiating time left to agree how to tackle it. But few insiders are confident that the talks that will end in Copenhagen in December will result in a deal that is fair and effective enough to meet the challenge.

Why is progress so slow when the science is so clear? Why do surveys show that about half of people in the United States are still unaware of the scientific consensus that human activity is causing the problem? Why do people in some of the world’s poorest countries believe that God is creating climate change and that there is therefore nothing people can do to prevent it?

I believe that this state of affairs exists, in part, because media coverage of climate change is lacking in both quantity and quality, and that journalists are often missing the real story, and with it the opportunity to inform their audiences in a responsible way.

In recent years, coverage across all media platforms has grown massively but even in the rich countries, there is very little relative to the scale of the problem. Researchers at the University of Liverpool in the UK showed that there were more newspaper articles on health issues in a typical month than on climate change over three years. Compared to media coverage of football, there is hardly any mention of the planetary emergency that is climate change.

Even when there is big news, coverage can be lacking. In May 2007, the IPCC released its most authoritative report yet on how to mitigate climate change. James Painter at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism showed that the evening news on the main TV stations in China, India, Mexico, Russia and South Africa made no mention at all of this report.

Coverage of climate science is also a problem in the world’s wealthiest nation. Researchers at George Mason University surveyed 489 American climate scientists last year and only 1% of them said broadcast or cable TV news about climate change was “very reliable.”

Media messages on climate change have tended to focus either on doom-laden scenarios of future impacts, on small acts such as changing light-bulbs that seem ineffective in proportion to the problem, or on distant polar bears whose fate is symbolic but largely irrelevant to most people.

While coverage varies a lot it is weakest in the Least Developed Countries. In these countries, which are the most vulnerable to climate change, journalists lack access to experts or officials who can provide locally relevant information.

They can rarely afford to travel to rural areas to report the experiences of the most vulnerable people. And if they can't do that, they certainly cannot afford to attend the international negotiations where their governments are meant to be fighting for a deal that is fair to their fellow citizens.

Of 1,500 journalists who registered to attend the UN climate change summit in Bali in December 2007, just 9 percent were from developing nations other than the host Indonesia. A much smaller number actually attended the meeting and for nearly the entire UN list of 50 Least Developed Countries there was zero media representation.

One of the biggest barriers is right at home in the newsroom. I have spoken about this with hundreds of journalists in Africa and the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean. They are all keen to report on climate change but they often tell me the same story — their editors say climate change does not attract audiences. This editorial blind spot comes, I believe, from the lack of science literacy in newsrooms and a failure to appreciate the human angles to this story.

For years media outlets in countries such as the United States and United Kingdom have been ignoring the scientific consensus on climate change and reporting an even split between those who say it is a problem and those who disagree.

Max Boykoff at Oxford University studied this in detail and concluded that: “United States television news coverage has perpetrated an informational bias by significantly diverging from the consensus view in climate science that humans contribute to climate change.” This has served to confuse and misinform the public and has helped to delay action to address climate change.

But climate change is no longer just a scientific story. Joseph Ageyo, a Kenyan broadcast journalist, recently said: “Climate change is not a problem because we do not know what the science is, but rather because we cannot agree on what to do with the science. In other words, the elephant in the room is politics.”

Ageyo is right. Climate change is not just a science or environment story that can be sidelined when a celebrity dies or a footballer gets drunk. It is a political story, a financial story. It is a story about money and power, and ultimately about justice and equity.

Eric Pooley, a contributor at Time magazine has warned however that: “If coverage of climate science is an at-risk adolescent, then coverage of climate policy is an infant threatened by crib death.” He has urged media outlets to create climate policy teams that include environmental science reporters, political reporters and business and energy reporters.

This mix, working together, would be able to combine their strengths to report more effectively on these three angles, which are deeply connected but usually reported on in isolation. For this to happen, media managers need to see that climate change is no longer the story. It is the context. The story today is all about daily impacts – on economies, on livelihoods, on ecosystems, on our health – and it should also be about ways of minimising these impacts.

And at its heart there is one thing that journalists need to ask. And that is this, why is progress so slow? The fact is that the power and money needed to tackle climate change are in abundant supply but the will to do so is sorely lacking. Why is this and why isn't the media focusing on this anomaly?

Why for instance is there so little critical reporting about the governments that are blocking progress at the UN climate-change talks?

Why is so much media coverage focused on what the governments of large and powerful nations want, and so little reporting of the voices and views of the most vulnerable people who will suffer the impacts of climate change but have contributed little to the problem?

As an example, the world's richer nations are moving towards agreement that a new climate treaty should aim to limit warming to 2 degrees Celsius, but this is an arbitrary figure set by the European Union. Two degrees might be fine for the world's wealthiest people but these numbers mean the difference between life and death for communities and even nations.

Last month, eighty of the world's most vulnerable countries – the least developed nations and the alliance of small island states – joined forces to demand that governments agree a more aggressive target – no more than 1.5 degrees. Speaking on their behalf, Ambassador Dessima Williams urged the world's media to carry the group's perspectives of these nations,

which are home to close to one billion of the world's most vulnerable people. But this story is going untold.

Something sinister contributed to the media's past failure to accurately represent the scientific consensus on climate change. And that something is still around and it wants to confuse public understanding about the urgency of action and the implications of policy decisions.

Companies with vested interests in maintaining the status quo have spend hundreds of millions of dollars in lobbying and PR campaigns in an effort to distort policy debates and subvert journalism. In doing so, they have eroded public confidence in either.

An information war is underway between a large and diverse majority who want to address climate change and a very powerful minority who do not. The first group includes scientists, indigenous peoples, religious leaders of every major faith, business people, youth groups, environmentalists and, yes, even politicians. The second group includes a smaller number of people, governments and corporations whose wealth and power stem from 'business as usual' polluting activities.

The media risk becoming unwilling participants in this struggle rather than just reporting on it and exposing the interests that hide behind so much of the opposition to tackling climate change. There are many debates to be had about the role of the media in the climate change story. I believe it must inform without dictating and to do that it need a much better grip on where the knowledge ends and the ideology begins.

Two years ago the British Broadcasting Corporation's director general Mark Thompson said the BBC would be a world leader in efforts to address climate change. He said it was the "UK's biggest peacetime emergency in history". It is bigger than that. It is global. And the decisions that media leaders make in the coming weeks and months will have an immense bearing on how this story ends.

But there is something else to consider. I said at the start that we are told that climate change is the biggest challenge to face humanity in modern times. I don't believe this is true. Climate change is just one of many symptoms of a much bigger challenge, which is the unsustainable way we are living on Earth and managing our natural resources.

Other symptoms are abundant — declining fisheries, deforestation, pollution, extinction of species... the list is long — and if the broadcast media is to fulfil a public service remit, it must do much more to explain the causes and consequences of these problems too.

Thank you for listening.

For Media. Climate Kids. Global Warming vs. Climate Change. Humans have caused major climate changes to happen already, and we have set in motion more changes still. Even if we stopped emitting greenhouse gases today, global warming would continue to happen for at least several more decades, if not centuries. That's because it takes a while for the planet (for example, the oceans) to respond, and because carbon dioxide – the predominant heat-trapping gas – lingers in the atmosphere for hundreds of years. There is a time lag between what we do and when we feel it. But it may not be too late to avoid or limit some of the worst effects of climate change. The US news media devote startlingly little time to climate change – how can newsrooms cover it in ways that will finally resonate with their audiences? To that end, the Nation and CJR are launching Covering Climate Change: A New Playbook for a 1.5-Degree World, a project aimed at dramatically improving US media coverage of the climate crisis. When the IPCC scientists issued their 12-year warning, they said that limiting temperature rise to 1.5C would require radically transforming energy, agriculture, transportation, construction and other core sectors of the global economy. Case Study Social Data Social Media Monitoring. Climate change denial around the world: Social media study. by Julia Miashkova on May 25, 2020. There are three things you can watch forever: fire burning, water falling, and climate change skeptics ignoring both and insisting that global warming is a hoax. Judging by the sheer number of climate hashtags posted by unique social media users, the U.S. takes the lead as the host of the biggest nationwide climate change debate. Top-3 countries with the biggest climate change debate will then be: USA (42.2K unique social media authors) This is natural given that the hashtags we have been monitoring are in English, too. Sign up for a free Awario trial. See Awario in action with a free 7-day trial. No credit card required. The percentage of climate change articles in The New York Times since 1980 that mention five basic facts about global warming. Credit: David Romps, UC Berkeley. Yet, as of 2019, the fact of a scientific consensus is mentioned in a mere 4% of Times articles about climate change, he and Retzinger found. But 20 years later, this mechanism is seldom mentioned, despite a whole new generation of readers. Two key facts – that climate change is already happening and that carbon dioxide from fossil fuel burning is causing it – have received the most ink in New York Times articles, though mention of the latter has dropped to nearly zero in recent years. Study examines how media around the world frame climate change news. Aug 13, 2019. Media coverage of climate change has had effects on public opinion on climate change, as it mediates the scientific opinion on climate change that the global temperature has increased in recent decades and that the trend is mainly caused by human-induced emissions of greenhouse gases. Almost all scientific bodies of national or international standing agree with this view, although a few organisations hold non-committal positions.