



Media Coverage of Climate Change

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2019

“THE BARRIERS TO COMBATING CLIMATE CHANGE ARE NOT TECHNOLOGICAL, THEY’RE POLITICAL.”

Lisa Hymes, Director of climate and energy at Media Matters for America

Media coverage of climate change has been a significant factor in shaping public perceptions and attitudes toward the issue. Thirty years ago, climate change theories began making headlines - this project explores more recent years in British media and examines if both varied political stances and scientific research have been represented appropriately. This issue will be studied focussing mainly on journalistic coverage of politics and human induced climate change science from January 2018 up until January 2019.

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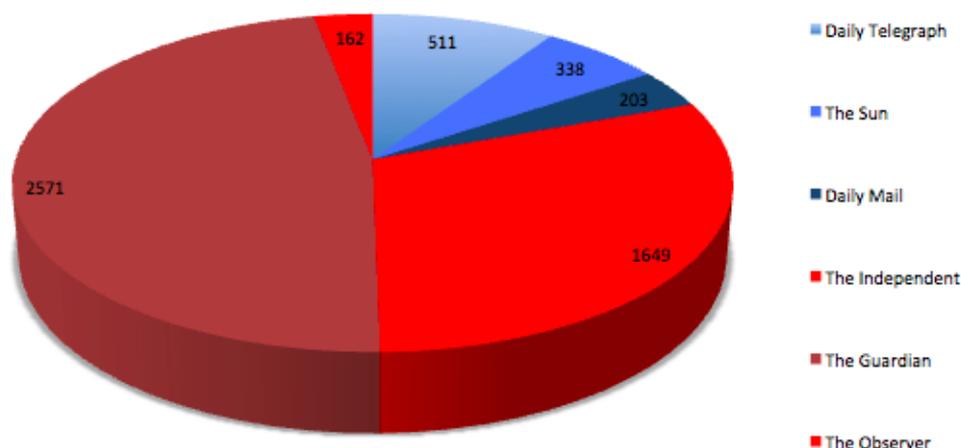
“Most climate scientists agree the main cause of the current global warming trend is human expansion of the "greenhouse effect". A group of 1,300 independent scientific experts from countries all over the world under the auspices of the united nations, concluded there's a more than 95 percent probability that human activities over the past 50 years have warmed our planet.” (NASA)

Research into anthropogenic effects on climate change can be traced back as far as the eighteenth century, when researchers investigated the relationship between deforestation and precipitation (Rajan, 2006). By the late nineteenth century, researchers began to look more specifically into the role of humans in climate change (Fleming, 1998).

2018 saw a number of environmental topics covered by British media such as; tax on meat, UK fracking, steak grown in laboratories, dealing with waste, air pollution, overpopulation, water pollution and microbeads. The amount of coverage these issues received from differing news outlets vary, as does the content within.

Quantitative analysis of media representation, using LexisNexis of overall climate change in six British newspapers from January 2018 – January 2019

Climate Change Articles From 2018



Doing a basic search of “climate change” over a year period on LexisNexis database, brought up 5,466 results. I then looked at each news providers individual coverage figure - the pie chart above shows which newspapers had covered the climate change topic or at least mentioned it in some way. Search results were as follows, The Guardian - 2571 articles, The Independent – 1649 articles, The Daily Telegraph – 511 articles, The Sun – 338 articles, The Daily Mail – 203 and The Observer – 162.

The results of this study highlight the level of disparity between different establishments content output. Forming the majority of climate change articles by 75%+ are the typically liberal to center-left newspapers, with the other three examples who are usually more affiliated with right-wing ideologies contributing >25%.

According to [Statista](#), The Sun and the Daily Mail receive the highest level of circulation, hence reaching the largest audience. With the Daily Telegraph ranked at fourth place, the readers of these newspapers will continually gain less knowledge on challenges the environment faces unless these publications drastically revise their content. Such disparity of stories being reported summons the question, what media effects this may generate. *“The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”*(Bernard Cohen, 1963) – this is classed as agenda setting, which was studied by McCombs and Shaw in 1968.

“WHEN CLIMATE CHANGE DID COME INTO THE STORY, IT WAS LIKELY TO BE DISCUSSED THROUGH A POLITICAL LENS, RATHER THAN A SCIENTIFIC ONE.”

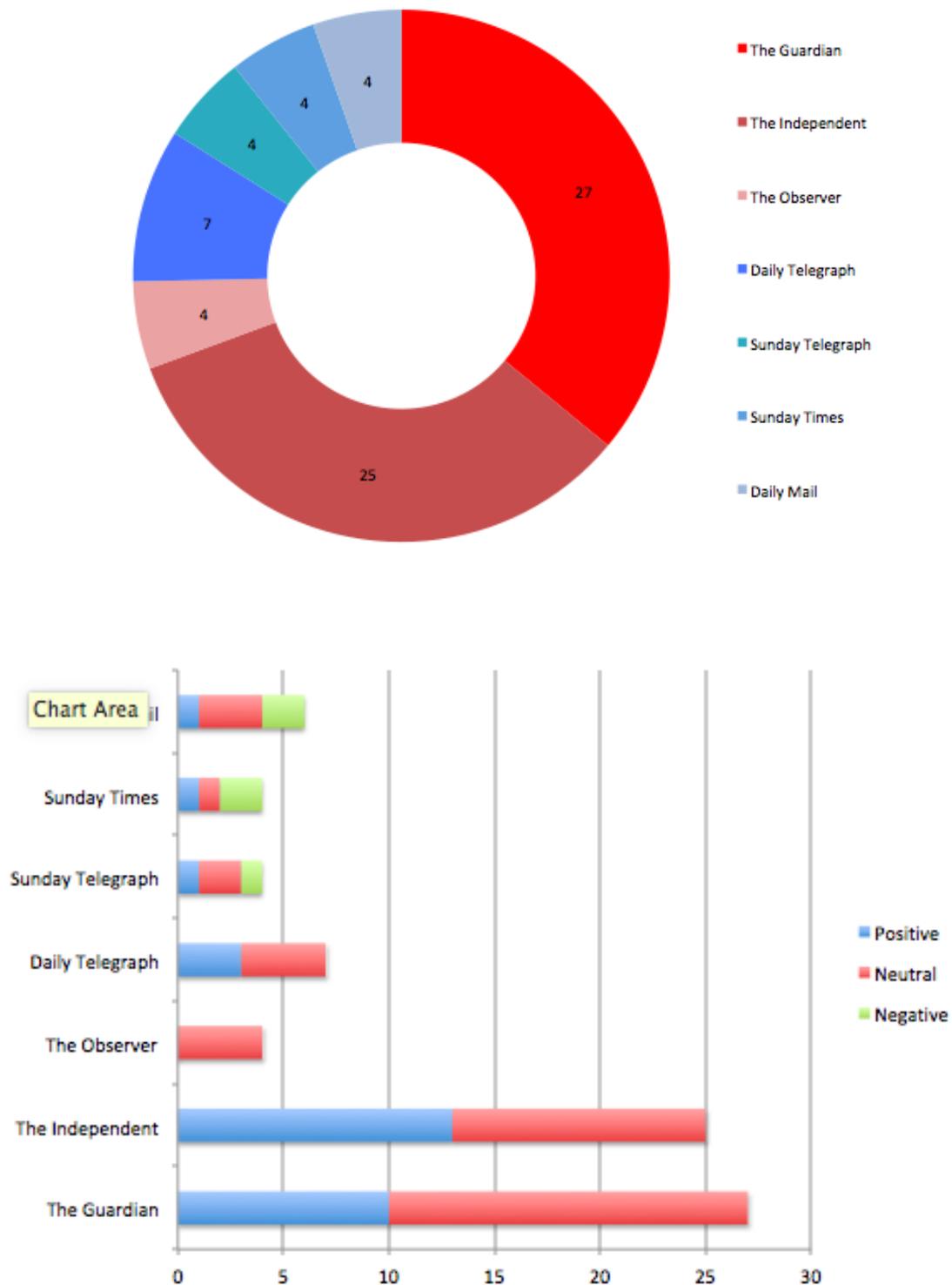
It is an unfortunate fact that those who control mass circulating newspapers through personal ownership can use their leverage to portray their own ideologies and frequently this can involve political agenda. *“Agenda-setting is fairly straightforward—there has to be a basic consensus regarding what constitutes newsworthy items so elite media become the gatekeepers for what information we have access to. The agenda that is put forth by the media impacts consumers’ perceptions regarding issue importance and also how salient or on a person’s mind a given topic is. Framing effects go one step further than this. Framing effects have to do with the way that a given story is packaged and presented to consumers of news. It is strongly impacted by the language that is used to describe given events or ascribed to actors who are identified as critical features of a given story. Language is critical in these presentations because it serves as the cognitive framework in which we understand the world around us and in the case of exposure to news make sense of a given event or story.”* (Azadeh Aalai, 2017)

The subject of framing leads me to my next topic of discussion, how the meat industry is reported. “Shifting to more plant-based foods is essential to combatting climate change, soil, air and water pollution, ocean dead zones, and myriad other problems caused by industrial livestock production.” (Peter Caton) This is a shared consensus between numerous scientists, academics, nutritionists, environmentalists, members of the public and many others. Yet it is a matter, which again divides the media. Here is an example of a [Daily Mail article](#) in comparison with an article from [The Independent](#). Due to the framing of these articles the readers will be left with a different perception of the same topic.

Studying articles published by; The Guardian, The Independent, The Observer, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Sunday Times and Daily Mail released during the past year I found around 75% of articles to do with industrial farming impacts and veganism to have been written by the “red” newspapers in comparison to the “blue” 25%.

Qualitative analysis to determine how news providers report on the same issue – a look at if the articles were positive, neutral or negative towards reducing industrial farming.

Newspaper Coverage of Climate Changes Link with Industrial Farming and Consuming Less Meat



Again, my results flag questions around morality of UK journalists, biases of the UK press and factual accuracy within reporting - such ambiguity can create distrust of the press within the UK public. "Overall in the UK, 81 per cent of people said the news media is important but just 32 per cent said they trust it – and only 5 per cent trust the news media "a lot"." (Charlotte Tobitt, 2018) This cynicism trickles through society leaving many public members removed from national matters, as they no longer know who or what to believe, nor do they wish to find out, this disillusion can damage our democracy.

How the mass media cover scientific subjects matters in many ways, whether scientists like it or not. Stem cells, genetically modified organisms, cloning, the environmental or health implications of chemicals or climate change: whatever the subject, media coverage has helped to shape public perception and, through it, affected how science is translated into policy, most notably in regard to the environment, new technologies and risks (Weingart *et al*, 2000).

Despite warnings from scientists there are those who deny and/or criticise climate change science and, alongside this - the UK government have been accused of not doing enough for pollution reform. "It is a scary thing to hear talk of the impacts of climate change and the suggestions that it might be too late to do anything. It is so much easier to live in denial, especially when you have charlatans in the media and politics who have seen this fear and have sought to profit from it." (Jericho, 2018)

There is a battle going on in which both sides view their opponents point of view as either hoax, conspiracy or ludicrous. Many whom believe in human induced climate change mainly believe it has a lot to do with corporate greed. Popular opinion is also that oil companies are funding think tanks that delegitimise scientific findings to place doubt in to the public mind in an attempt to secure the future of their sizeable investments in oil rigs "Conservative politicians denounce climate change fears to endear themselves to their base – and more importantly to coal companies, which flush cash into politics just like they flood toxins into our lungs." (Webb, 2018) Disputers of the environmental crisis have been accused of living in denial as this is easier to process "What's more comforting to think about: that a money-hungry cabal of scientists and liberals are perpetuating a giant myth to kill the coal industry and that only you have it figured out? Or that an unstoppable calamity will endanger all future generations of your family?" (Webb, 2018) Other reasons they have to contest the research is that development is relatively slow it's not something they can regularly see happening with their own eyes; also it can be a complicated topic so some of the warnings can sound absurd and in-turn unbelievable there are also those who believe it's a left-wing, hippy conspiracy gone mad. "There is also the simple depiction of climate change as a conspiracy, exaggeration or even as a positive development" (Boykoff, 2008).

"One of the most popular talking points among climate science denialists is that CO₂ is just great and the more of it that we pump out, the better things will be. This goes against the advice of every science organisation of repute on the planet. But who

needs science when rapper [BoB \(more here\)](#) can apparently just nudge us off the edge of the Earth?"

"There are a number of members of Parliament that are increasingly sceptical and questioning the scientific consensus about climate change and global warming. Three Conservative MPs stand out in the category: Peter Lilley, Christopher Chope and Andrew Tyrie, as they all voted against the Climate Change Act 2008. However, they are not the only sceptics in Parliament, other Conservative members include John Redwood, Douglas Carswell, David Davis and Roger Helmer, and from the Labour Party the name that comes up is Graham Stringer." (Campaign Against Climate Change)

Lord Lawson a Conservative politician and journalist, and Benny Peiser a social anthropologist, launched a lobby group named The Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF) in 2009 in the House of Lords. The group came about days after leaked emails from the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia first appeared online ([More here](#)) and have since been labelled as "the opposition of climate change" they however class themselves as "open-minded".

(GWPF video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8350XaGeZY>

Former Deputy Prime Minister for Labour, John Prescott said: "Apparently, Lord Lawson is setting up a high-powered all-party (and non-party) think tank, the Global Warming Policy Foundation," he told the house, noting that the Conservative peer is also a main player in a body called the Central Europe Trust Ltd yet assured that the two were not linked. Prescott went on to say: "His clients are Elf, Total, Shell, BP, Amoco, Texaco - that is a lot of oil companies. From what I can see of it, it is not so much a think tank as a petrol tank."

Peter Lilley a Conservative Politian is on the GWPFs board of trustees, who voted "moderately against" laws to stop climate change. Lilley said: "I wasn't voting against the science. I've never disputed the science at all. On the way I looked out the window and it was snowing in October. So I went and called a point of order – and I pointed out to the house that we were passing a measure on the belief that the world was getting warmer and it was snowing in October in London for the first time in 74 years." While the foundation's membership appears to be dwindling, it still maintains a platform of influence.

Is there space in our political ranks for climate sceptics? Even the BBC are no longer required to interview climate change deniers yet we have those who create and reform policies, in a position of immense power who don't believe in what's said to be the most profound problem for man kind and planetary survival. "Politicians who reject scientific advice, dismiss basic principles of risk management, and are blind to shifting technology and economic trends are likely to apply those same ideological blinkers to other parts of their role."

(BBC video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oHhIM5udHM>

Conservative MP for Northern Somerset, Jacob Rees-Mogg believes climate change is not worth changing our ways for, it seems he would rather deny its extremity, up flood protection and continue having meetings with Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's former chief strategist and previous chairman of the right-wing and climate science denying website Breitbart News, to discuss how conservative movements can prosper. It's notable that Mogg is on the list for the next potential leader of the Conservative party.

(Jacob Rees-Mogg video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frs1Glq8pmw>

This leads me to the UK's governing party and their intentions for a "greener future".

"Negotiating a context defined by concerned publics, experts, lobbyists, and structural limits on what they can do, governments can choose to act on climate issues. Some of them already do. Dealing with major climate change issues has however never been a part of the core priorities of any government. But it remains the case that the environment is not core business in the same way that the economy is. Governments acted swiftly and with the expenditure of vast sums of money in response to global financial crisis in 2008–9. They have never shown anything like this urgency or willingness to spend on any environmental issue. The difference is easily explained: the first concern of any government in a market economy is always to maintain the conditions for economic growth, which normally also means maintaining the confidence of markets in the government's own operations (Lindblom 1982)." (John S. Dryzek *et al*, 2011)

The above quote highlights issues rooted through the political spectrum; economic growth has been the main focus feeding our capitalist society and other issues tend to take a back seat. They are not deemed as important as deficit or debt or BREXIT. We are drowning in economic detail when scientists are trying to warn us about cataclysmic events on the horizon. Politicians say they are listening, they say they are acting, they sign agreements – but I see little urgency. In fact, I see fracking ([Daily Mail article on "scary protestors"](#)) and greenbelt land disappearing.

Environmental causes are increasingly popular with the British public - The governing party fared poorly at the 2017 general election among young voters and graduates, consistently two of the most pro-environment demographics. In 2017 the Tories announced an ambitious 25-year green plan and banned microbeads in 2018, perhaps in an attempt to gain favour with voters. Plans to ban single-use plastics are also in circulation – it seems time is a luxury we can not afford, hopefully members of the party who see climate change as low priority won't hinder progression.

The integral role played by the media is not surprising, as it is still the main source of information and opinion for millions of readers and viewers—and voters—through newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the internet. As people gain most of their political, economic or other news from the media, so they do with scientific stories. Various studies have shown that the public gathers much of its knowledge about science from the mass media (Wilson, 1995),

Scientists and journalists have been known to talk past each other, both using language rooted in professional shorthand. But when it's time to make deadline, these two groups need to make clear, accurate and meaningful contact. (Bud Ward, 2009)

Climate change presents perhaps the most profound challenge ever to have confronted human social, political, and economic systems. The stakes are massive, the risks and uncertainties severe, the economics controversial, the science overwhelmed, the politics bitter and complicated, the psychology puzzling, the impacts devastating. The social problem-solving mechanisms we currently possess were not designed, and have not evolved, to cope with anything like an interlinked set of problems of this severity, scale, and complexity. There are no precedents. So far, we have failed to address the challenge adequately. One of the central social, political, and economic questions of the century is: how then do we act? (Drysek *et al*, 2011)

Attacking the credibility of scientists, disregarding their consensus and reducing their findings to personal beliefs. The effect of this: Science becomes belief. Belief becomes science. Everything becomes nothing. Nothing becomes everything. All can believe and disbelieve all. We all can know everything and know nothing. Everyone lives as an expert on every subject. No experts live on any subject. (Kendi, 2019)

During my research I've noticed a trend in that environmental articles have become more in sync, scepticism on the truth behind the science within the UK seems to be depleting. Newspapers that have made derogatory implications to environmental science now seem to do so on a less. Today's youth are tackling climate change head on with school strikes demanding environmental change, Veganuary 2019 had its largest success to date. Some headlines may be negative, but at least there is noise coming from scientists and 'friends of the earth' – even Trump can no longer justify it as "all a hoax" and now agrees that perhaps it's something. There is still huge disparity of environmental coverage coursing through British media; the potential political reasons as to why are disconcerting to say the least. There is concern, fear and doubt. But there is also hope, truth and solidarity. May we prevail.

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Appendix

LexisNexis for all my chart data

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