

MASS MEDIA COVERAGE OF GLOBAL WARMING: AN UPDATE

John R. Fisher, Northwest Missouri State University
fisherhousejohn@gmail.com

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A consensus may no longer exist about the causes of climate change. Only last year most media and many people supported the view that climate change was caused by people's use of fossil fuels. However, the public view of global warming appears to have changed. Much of this change in people's attitudes came from media coverage. This was augmented by concern for the economy and the effect of global warming legislation on the economy.

While few studies exist of mass media saturation using the diffusion of innovation model, research of global warming coverage by Dispensa and Brulle (2003) and Fisher (2007) explored methodologies that could show the diffusion of ideas among the press. A need exists to examine current coverage comparing it with coverage from a few years ago. Such a study would show the current state of global warming ideas among the media and further explore the methodology as a means of examining diffusion of innovation in the media.

Keywords: Media Coverage, Global Warming Fraud, Press Objectivity, Policymaking, Economic Competitiveness

INTRODUCTION

Recent happenings in the global warming debate have the potential to change attitudes about whether climate change is human-caused and about the need for U.S. legislation and global climate policy. Among the occurrences are revelations about the integrity of research, harsh weather conditions, a global financial crisis, and polls showing a lack of popular support. Even with these changes many politicians seem to be determined to move ahead with what may prove to be very unpopular and financially devastating legislation. This paper explores whether media coverage and the attitudes of the press have changed because of these recent happenings.

Prior to 2000 Ross Gelbspan and other environmentalists lamented about the stranglehold that the fossil fuel industry had on media coverage. "The fossil fuel lobby has mounted an extremely effective campaign of disinformation to persuade the public and policy-makers that the issue of atmospheric warming is still stuck in the limbo of scientific uncertainty," wrote Gelbspan. However, advocates of human-caused global warming began their own lobbying effort that won over the press and a majority of the public to what became known as the consensus view (Matthews, 2005; Begley, 2007). The media stopped listening to global warming skeptics and ridiculed them as lunatics. Alternative viewpoints are no longer sought nor listened to. Reporters adopted a view that, like the dangers of smoking, global warming is a reality caused by human consumption and something must be done. The lack of impartiality in media coverage is potentially dangerous. Closure of the press debate on global warming will lead a failure to discuss viable alternatives that might promote economic growth, and policies that discourage industry and competitiveness.

DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION

Journalists exert influence on each other. Journalists often gain their knowledge of events and issues from other journalists through reading and listening to the media. Although journalists may take an attitude of neutral observer, they at some point also adopt ideas or innovations. Most journalists appear to have adopted the notion that global warming or climate change is human-caused and that governments must do something to reduce the levels of carbon dioxide (Fisher, 2007).

Ryan and Gross (1943) described adopters in terms of five categories: (1) innovators (2.5%), (2) early adopters (13.5%), (3) early majority (34%), (4) late majority (34%), and (5) laggards (16%). Rogers (2003) enlarged on these categories by defining their application. The notion of adoption is described as diffusion of innovation.

Media channels are usually the most effective way of making adopters aware of an issue. However, it is usually through interpersonal contact that people are persuaded. While mass media channels are relatively more important at the knowledge stage, interpersonal channels are more important at the persuasion stage in the innovation-decision process. Similarly, the mass media are more important than interpersonal channels for earlier adopters than for later adopters (Rogers, 2003).

Adoption of ideas or innovations follow an S-curve first observed in 1903 by the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who plotted the original S-shaped diffusion curve. Innovators and early adopters are shown at the bottom of the S-curve while laggards are at the top of the curve. Although numerous studies have been done of the public as adopters, little is known about journalists and their patterns of adoption. Their patterns are likely similar, with some possible variations related to the nature of the journalistic trade. Journalistic adoption of global warming would likely fit this pattern.

REPORTING SCIENCE

Reporting of science is problematic. Science draws from many sources with multiple versions of knowledge and is often tentative and inconclusive. On-the-other-hand, journalists seek to clarify and provide certainty. Journalists transform “provisional findings into certain findings,” often exaggerating the scientific claims and downplaying the qualifiers and caveats from the original journal articles. The result is a story that may appear more certain to the public than the data do to scientists (Stocking, 1999).

Journalistic practices of trying to achieve objectivity by drawing from two opposing points of view may actually add to the uncertainty. By drawing opinions from all sides, reporters give equal weight to majority scientists and fringe scientists and to scientists and non-scientists. Drawing information from opposite viewpoints also meets demands for novelty and significance. Journalists seek out stories that defy conventional scientific wisdom knowing that “contrarian stories are novel and therefore newsworthy” (Stocking, 1999).

Ross Gelbspan (1998, pp. 57-58) has asserted, “The professional canon of journalistic fairness requires reporters who write about a controversy to present competing points of view. When the issue is of a political or social nature, fairness – presenting the most compelling arguments of both sides with equal weight – is a fundamental check on biased reporting. But this canon causes problems when it is applied to issue of science. It seems to demand that journalists present competing points of views on a scientific question as though they had equal scientific weight, when actually they do not.” Striving for objectivity and balance may contribute to uncertainty.

Nisbet and Huges (2006) reviewed how attention cycles and frames influence a scientific debate. By controlling media attention and framing an issue in favorable terms interest groups have a potential for influencing policy making. News coverage follows the “issue attention cycle” proposed by Downs (1972). An issue rests in a pre-problem stage until a traumatic event “catapults” it to the public attention. The rise in attention then leads to pressure on the political system to solve the problem. It remains in the policy domain even after the initial attention diminishes. As long as changes occur incrementally, little attention is paid to the issue, but when something dramatic occurs press coverage increases and public pressure is applied on policy makers.

Corbett and Durfee (2004) claim that the level of uncertainty about global warming coverage has increased as politicians and interest groups have replaced scientists as the primary sources for information. The best way of assuring certainty is to put the story in its context, rather than reporting controversy. The various accounts “make it appear to readers that scientists are much more uncertain than they actually are about whether global warming is occurring” (Zehr, 1999, pp. 10-11).

Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) examined coverage of global warming from 1988 to 2002 in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. They found that the norm of balanced reporting provided a biased view of global warming. Because journalists provided both sides of global warming story, the authors suggested that the newspapers kept alive the impression that the reality of global warming was still in question.

Dispensa and Brulle (2003) found that coverage for the year 2000 in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* showed a higher percentage of stories against or giving both sides than did papers in Finland and New Zealand. *The New York Times* carried 37 stories on global warming; 16 supporting, 6 against, and 15 both; the *Washington Post* carried 34 stories, 13 supporting, 5 against, and 16 both; the *Helsingin Sanomat* carried 7 stories, all supporting the global warming; and the *New Zealand Herald* carried 45 stories, 40 supporting the theory, one against and 4 with both sides. The reason they postulated was that the U.S. has a fossil fuel driven economy; New Zealand and Finland do not.

In a replication of the study by Dispensa and Brulle (2003), Fisher (2007) compared coverage in Canada’s *Globe and Mail* with the *New York Times* in the United States. Canada, which has about 1/10 the population of the United States, was chosen because of its geographic location close to the U.S. Both have similar economies, industries, environmental issues and media coverage. Both have major fossil fuel industries.

This study followed the Dispensa and Brulle approach in using the key words, “global warming,” to search web sites for the *New York Times* and for the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. The search identified 146 stories containing the words “global warming” in the *New York Times* and 533 articles in the *Globe and Mail* during a year beginning from the fall 2005 to fall 2006.

An overwhelming majority of the articles from the *New York Times* (94%) and the *Globe and Mail* (96%) were identified as supporting global warming. No articles were found to be against and only a small proportion, often industry-based, reported both viewpoints. The number of articles about global warming in the *New York Times* was almost four times greater in 2006 than in 2000. The number of articles in the *Globe and Mail* during 2006 was almost four times (actually 3.6 times) greater than in the *New York Times* during the same year.

With such a large number of stories supporting manmade global warming, it appears that journalists at these newspapers had adopted an anthropogenic view of the causes of climate change. Diffusion of innovation was close to being complete. The problem is that when an idea reaches diffusion levels, journalists lose all sense of objectivity and balance. They no longer examine both sides of a story. Reporters adopt the view that, like the dangers of smoking, global warming is a reality caused by human consumption requiring something be done. Alternative viewpoints were no longer sought nor listened to. They have accepted the viewpoint that a direct correlation exists between manmade carbon emissions and global warming similar to the relationship between smoking and cancer and HIV and AIDS.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE SCIENCE OF GLOBAL WARMING

The United Nations climate summit last December in Copenhagen was to be the ultimate triumph for officials and global warming advocates. The conference was to establish a global climate change agenda where Kyoto failed. However, a number of setbacks occurred that have stalled the environmentalist program. Since then problems for the human-caused global warming campaign have increased.

Global warming advocates, including former vice-president Al Gore, have based many of their claims on a report from a United Nations committee, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In November 2009 emails were discovered that revealed that data used in the report were falsified. The emails showed that prominent climate scientists from the University of East Anglia’s Climatic Research Unit hid data that showed the decline in global temperatures and excluded contradictory viewpoints from their reports. In the process they violated Freedom of Information laws. Many of the scientists were involved in the development of the UN’s IPCC report (Newman, 2010; Wentz, 2010).

As stories of the fraud came out in the press, researchers began scrutinizing the IPCC report more closely. Factual errors started turning up that put in question the credibility of the report. In its final report, the IPCC suggested that Himalayan glaciers could melt by 2035 or sooner. The result would first be devastating floods, then droughts. Billions of people would be affected, many dying from the worst famine in history. This and several other assertions were taken from an advocacy group’s propaganda literature, which took it from an Indian magazine article that has since been discredited. The author received millions to study the effects of global warming

based on the strength of the bogus glacier claim. Because the claim was inaccurate, the IPCC has been forced to recant it (Newman, 2010; Wente, 2010).

The IPCC report also claimed that 40 percent of the Amazon rain forest was in danger because of global warming. The IPCC report attributed the information to another advocacy group's literature. On closer examination of the literature, it was found the advocacy group had not even hinted at such a prediction (Newman, 2010; Wente, 2010).

Another advocacy group report was used to predict incorrectly that rain-dependent agriculture in some African countries could be cut in half by 2020. This false claim was repeated in the condensed "Synthesis Report" of the IPCC. Other errors are the misuse of Chinese temperature records and false claims of increased hurricane frequency. Also, the government of the Netherlands recently forced the IPCC to retract its claim that 55 percent of the Netherlands was below sea level. It's actually 26 percent.

Even before these obvious efforts to defraud and deceive, the consensus claim was in doubt (Brennan, 2007). However, the media were not listening. A study by Dr. Klaus-Martin Schulte (Asher, 2007) of 528 global warming papers puts the number of studies explicitly endorsing the consensus view at only seven percent. When combined with studies that implicitly accept global warming the figure rises to 45%; however, the largest group of studies are neutral (48%), neither accepting or rejecting the hypothesis. Six percent reject global warming outright. This study and a similar one by Peiser (2005) rebutted earlier claims by historian Naomi Oreskes (2004) showing "an unanimous, scientific consensus on the anthropogenic causes of recent global warming."

GOVERNMENT SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL WARMING

Based on the IPCC report and other claims of global warming scientists, governments around the world have been advocating legislation that would ultimately have little impact on carbon dioxide levels, but would do much to harm economies of both the developed and developing countries. The penultimate event of the global warming movement was to be held in Copenhagen in December 2010. The global warming movement had proposed "a complex set of international agreements involving vast transfers of funds, intrusive regulations in national economies, and substantial changes to the domestic political economies of most countries on the planet," wrote Walter Russell Mead of the Council on Foreign Relations (2010). The Copenhagen conference, attended by Obama and other world leaders, was a bust, partly because the global-warming scandals had left the movement in shambles.

In the United States the proposed legislation is called "cap and trade." U.S. Senators Joseph Lieberman and John Warner introduced this bill in 2007, claiming "prompt. Decisive action is critical" to fight global warming. The act would establish an emissions trading system that allows companies that emit fewer greenhouse gases than permitted to sell them to companies that exceed their allowances (Lartigue and Balis, 2008).

However, public opposition to global warming legislation has increased with news of the falsifying of climate change science. A Gallup/USA Today poll done in December 2009 showed

the 85 percent of Americans want a greater emphasis on the economy while only 12 percent support action on global warming (Mead, 2010). In its annual update (done in March 2010) on U.S. attitudes toward the environment, Gallup found that 48% of Americans say the seriousness of global warming is generally exaggerated, up from 41% in 2009 and 31% in 1997, when Gallup first asked the question (Stanglin, 2010).

NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

Many of the recent news stories about the global warming fraud came from some the elite establishment publications. When Fisher first did his review of *The New York Times* and *Toronto Globe and Mail* in 2007, these newspapers and others wouldn't have considered publishing skeptical viewpoints of global warming. They are now publishing information expressing alternative views of the causes climate change.

In 2007 Fisher found in *The Toronto Globe and Mail* 96% of articles supported global warming. Recently Margaret Wentz (2010) wrote in *The Globe and Mail*, "By exaggerating the certainties, papering over the gaps, demonizing the skeptics and peddling tales of imminent catastrophe, [global warming advocates] discredited the entire climate-change movement." She quoted analyst and supporter Walter Russell Mead who wrote, "The global warming movement as we have known it is dead." Death resulted from "a combination of bad science and bad politics." "The strategy pursued by activists (including scientists who have crossed the line into advocacy) has turned out to be fatally flawed," wrote Wentz. "The great global warming collapse: As the science scandals keep coming, the air has gone out of the climate-change movement."

Andrew Neil (2010) writing for the BBC admitted the global warming campaign was falling apart in his piece entitled "The dam is cracking." BBC has in recent years issued dire predictions of global warming almost daily and last year sat on the East Anglia e-mails for over a month until the Guardian and other media made it impossible to ignore them. The BBC claimed it wasn't aware of the significance of the information it was given (Newman, 2010). Neil wrote, "Every time I have questioned politicians about global warming they have fallen back on the mantra that '2,500 scientists can't be wrong,' referring to the vast numbers supposedly behind the IPCC consensus." However, what he found out is the majority of those involved in the IPCC process were not scientists but politicians, bureaucrats, NGOs and green activists.

The "neoconservative" Weekly Standard ran a cover story by Steven F. Hayward (March 15, 2010) with a cartoon depicting polar bears laughing at a naked and freezing Al Gore. The article, entitled "In Denial — The meltdown of the climate campaign," reported the shoddy work of the IPCC and calls for "a serious shakeup." Hayward wrote, "It is increasingly clear that the leak of the internal emails and documents of the Climante Research Unit at the University of East Anglia in November has done for the climate change debate what the Pentagon Papers did for the Vietnam war debate 40 years ago – changed the narrative decisively."

While the establishment *Guardian* led the charge in the investigation of the East Anglia emails, the prestigious *Sunday Times of London* has directed many of the other investigations against the global-warming fraud. The times debunked claims related to the Amazon rain forests and the Himalayan glaciers (Wentz, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from the state of the global warming science and recent news media coverage that there may no longer be a consensus about the causes of climate change. Only last year most media and many people supported the view that climate change was caused by people's use of fossil fuels. However, the public view of global warming appears to have changed, beginning with revelations in November 2009 that scientists at the University of East Anglia (in Great Britain) falsified data and the later discrediting of much of the source information for the report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Much of this change in people's attitudes came from media coverage of this global warming fraud. This was augmented by concern for the economy and the effect of global warming legislation on the economy.

While few studies exist of mass media saturation using the diffusion of innovation model, research by Dispensa and Brulle (2003) and Fisher (2007) explored methodologies that could show the diffusion of ideas among the press. Their studies suggested that the press viewed global warming as manmade. Fisher noted the limitations of his research, which focused narrowly on two publications. A need exists to examine current coverage comparing it with coverage from a few years ago. Such a study would show the current state of global warming ideas among the media and further explore the methodology as a means of examining diffusion of innovation in the media.

REFERENCES

- Asher, M. (2007, August 29). Comprehensive survey of published climate research reveals changing viewpoints. In *DailyTech.com*. <http://www.dailytech.com>
- Begley, S. (2007, August 13). Global-warming deniers: A well-funded machine. *Newsweek*. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20122975/site/newsweek>
- Brennan, P. (2007, Aug. 6). Global warming at odds with science. *NewsMax.Com*. <http://archive.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2007/8/6/104929.shtml>
- Boykoff, M. T. and J. M. Boykoff. 2004. Balance as bias: Global warming and the US prestige press. *Global Environmental Change* 14: 125-136.
- Corbett, J. & Durfee, J. (2004, December). Testing Public (Un)Certainty of Science. *Science Communication*, 26(2), 129-151. Retrieved from Communication & Mass Media Complete database.
- Dispensa, J. M. and R. J. Brulle. (2003). Media's social construction of environmental issues: Focus on global warming – a comparative study. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23:10.
- Downs, A. (1972). "Up and down with ecology: The issue attention cycle." *The Public Interest* 28:38-51.
- Fisher, J.R. (2007). Media global warming coverage: Its impact on economic growth and competitiveness. *Competition Forum*, Vol. 5, pp. 81-86.
- Gelbspan, R. 1998. *The heat is on: The climate crisis, the coverup, the prescription*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Press.
- Gelbspan, R. (2000, June). "The mismatch between the cultures of journalism and science." Presentation for C3 Conference in Waterloo. Cited in Dispensa, Jaclyn Marisa and Robert J. Brulle. 2003. Media's social construction of environmental issues: Focus on global

- warming – a comparative study. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23:10. pp. 74-105.
- Hayward, S.F. (2010, March 15). In denial; the meltdown of the climate campaign. [WeeklyStandard.com](http://www.weeklystandard.com).
- Lartigue, C. & R. Balis. (2008, June). The Lieberman-Warner Cap and Trade Bill: Quick Summary and Analysis. National Policy Analysis. <http://www.nationalcenter.org/NPA570.html>
- Lindzen, R. (2006, April 12). Climate of fear: Global-warming alarmists intimidate dissenting scientists into silence [Editorial]. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved September 23, 2007, from <http://opinionjournal.com/110008220>
- Morano, M. (2007, August 6). Newsweek's global warming blunder. In *NewsMax.com*. <http://archive.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2007/8/6/100434.shtml>
- Matthews, R. (2005, Jan. 1). "Leading scientific journals 'are censoring debate on global warming.'" Telegraph Group Limited. <http://news.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/05/01/wglob01.xml>
- Mead, W.R. (2010, Feb. 1). The Death of Global Warming. *The American Interest Online* <http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/wrm/2010/02/01/the-death-of-global-warming/>
- Newman, A. (2010, March 30). Global-warming alarmism dying a slow death. *The New American*. <http://www.thenewamerican.com/index.php/tech-mainmenu-30/environment/3211-global-warming-alarmism-dying-a-slow-death>
- Nisbet, M. C. and M. Huges. 2006. Attention cycles and frames in plant biotechnology debate: Managing power and participation through the press/policy connection. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 11:3-40.
- Oreskes, N. (2004). The scientific consensus on climate change. *Science*, Vol. 306, Issue 5702, 1686, 3 December 2004.
- Peiser, B. (2005, May 4). Dr. Benny Peiser's letter to Science Magazine and the story of its rejection. In *CFACT Europe*. <http://www.cfact-europe.org/index1.html>
- Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th Edition. New York: Free Press.
- Ryan, B. and N. Gross. 1943. The diffusion of hybrid corn in two Iowa communities. *Rural Sociology*, 8:15–24.
- Sheppard, N. (2007, August 5). Newsweek disgrace: 'Global-warming deniers: A well-funded machine'. In *NewsBusters.org*. <http://newsbusters.org/node/14638>
- Samuelson, R. J. (2007, August 20). Samuelson: A different view of global warming [Editorial]. *Newsweek*. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20226462/site/newsweek/page/0/>
- Stanglin, Doug. (2010, March 11). Gallup poll shows Americans less worried about global warming threat. On Deadline. <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/ondeadline/post/2010/03/poll-show-americans-less-worried-about-global-warming-threat/1>
- Stocking, S. H. (1999). "How journalists deal with scientific uncertainty" in *Communicating Uncertainty: Media Coverage of New and Controversial Science*. Edited by Friedman, Sharon M., Dunwoody, Sharon & Rogers, Carol L. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Zehr, S. C. (1999). "Scientists' representations of uncertainty" in *Communicating Uncertainty: Media Coverage of New and Controversial Science*. Edited by Friedman, Sharon M., Dunwoody, Sharon & Rogers, Carol L. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.