

Are the media all 'doom and gloom'? Not when it comes to coverage of our oceans

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The news media are often accused by adopting a "doom and gloom" tone, especially when it comes to coverage of the environment. However, a new study on how journalists report on the state of our oceans shows that view may be misguided.

The research, conducted by researchers at New York University and the University of Miami (Fla.), shows that "doom and gloom" [language](#) was present in only 10 percent of the analyzed U.S. newspaper articles; by contrast, optimistic language—such as, "the oceans are mostly intact, still wild enough to bounce back to ecological health" (New York Times, January 15, 2015)—was present in more than a quarter of these stories. In addition, nearly half of the examined stories on [ocean](#) health issues cited potential solutions to problems described in the sample's articles.

"Journalists use more than twice as much optimistic language as 'doom and gloom' language when they write about the state of the oceans," says Lisa Johns, a graduate student at the University of Miami's Abess Center for Ecosystem Science and Policy and co-author on the study, which appears in the journal *Global Environmental Change*. "And journalists are doing a good job of covering solutions to the problems in the ocean they describe."

"There are some who accuse the [news media](#) of being 'doom and gloom' when it comes to the oceans, so we set out to test whether this was empirically true," adds Jennifer Jacquet, an assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Studies at NYU and co-author on the

study. "The news is simply not all 'doom and gloom' when it comes to ocean reporting, and our study should put that argument to rest."

The study examined 169 articles appearing in four U.S. newspapers (the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and the Wall Street Journal) between July 2001 and February 2015 that addressed the state of the world's oceans.

The articles included 80 on climate change (47 percent); 66 on the status of a species or population (39 percent); 52 on pollution (31 percent); 23 on offshore drilling (14 percent); and five on aquaculture, which is a method for farming ocean species (3 percent). The vast majority of articles cited peer-reviewed research (64 percent) or another form of governmental or scientific report (30 percent), with 6 percent of the total not explicitly mentioning a source or study.

Interestingly, while doom and gloom language was present in 10 percent of all articles in this study, only 4 percent contained only this type of language (e.g., "At this point, without human intervention, the species could go extinct within our lifetimes," Los Angeles Times, July 4, 2012); the remaining articles expressed both doom and gloom and optimistic language.

In addition, the study found that headlines used more alarmist terminology (e.g. "ravaged," "collapse," "doom," "smoking gun," "decimated," "perils," "menace," "lethal," "crisis," "catastrophe," "disaster," "dire," "point of no return," etc.) than did the articles' body (21 percent, or 35 headlines, vs. 10 percent, or 17 articles).

More information: Lisa N. Johns et al, Doom and gloom versus optimism: An assessment of ocean-related U.S. science journalism (2001-2015), *Global Environmental Change* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.04.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.04.002)

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