

Study examines how media around the world frame climate change news

August 13 2019



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Climate change is a problem facing countries around the world, but media coverage of the topic differs from one nation to the next. A new study from the University of Kansas shows the way media frame climate

change coverage can be predicted by several national factors, yet none tend to frame it as an immediate problem requiring national policies to address the issue.

While richer countries tend to frame [climate](#) change coverage as a political issue, [poorer countries](#) more often frame it as an international issue that the world at large needs to address.

"Media can tell people what to think about. At the same time, framing can have an effect on how people think about certain issues," said Hong Vu, assistant professor of journalism at KU and the study's lead author. "Not only can framing have an impact on how an issue is perceived but on whether and how policy is made on the issue. With [big data](#), machine-learning techniques, we were able to analyze a large amount of media climate change coverage from 45 countries and territories from 2011 to 2015."

Vu and co-authors Yuchen Liu, graduate student at KU; and Duc Vinh Tran of Hanoi University of Science and Technology published their findings in the journal *Global Environmental Change*. They analyzed over 37,000 articles and considered national factors such as economic development, weather and energy consumption. They reviewed headlines from nationally circulated publications of varying political ideologies that contained the keywords "greenhouse gas," "climate change" and/or "global warming," or the local language equivalent.

The most consistent predictor of how the issue was framed was a nation's gross domestic product per capita.

"We showed that the issue is more politicized in richer countries. In poorer countries, it was framed more as an international issue," Vu said. "Which makes sense, as poorer countries don't have the resources that richer countries do to fight it."

Even when richer countries framed the issue as one they could address with their more plentiful resources, it was often also framed as a [political issue](#) and would focus on debate or argument about political approaches as opposed to proposing policy solutions. Media from richer countries also focused more on the science of climate change.

When climate change was framed as an economic issue, it was in countries that had the most severe climates and those that have experienced the most adverse consequences of climate change and [natural disasters](#), loss of life and property, and economic effects.

In terms of social progress framing, richer countries framed the issue in terms of energy policy and use. Those that emit the most [carbon dioxide](#) framed content in terms of energy issues, while poorer countries and those that had experienced the most severe climates focused more on natural impact.

The study also used independent nation-level variables from several databases, including the World Bank, the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, the Global Carbon Atlas Project and Freedom House, all nongovernment organizations working in development or on climate change.

The authors argue that the international relations frame being the most widely used reflects the fact that climate change is a problem every nation needs to address. Economic effects being second most popular reflects that fighting climate change will have impacts on every economy and that when natural disasters and climate change were discussed, they were nearly always brought forth in an economic sense. They also contend that richer countries framing the issue as political reflects that climate change skeptics in those nations gaining more media prominence and the efforts of multiple groups trying to politicize the issue, influence media agendas and policymaking.

The study helps add to the understanding of media influence on climate change coverage, Vu said. Future work will address questions of framing the topic, if it's done on local, national or global levels, if communicators suggest solutions, if such solutions are attributed to individuals, businesses or governments and efficacy of proposed solutions. Three decades of communications on the topic show there is not a sense of immediacy in covering the problem and influencing policy.

"As communications researchers we want to know why, if climate change entered public discussion more than 30 years ago and we've been covering it as a global problem since, why can't we slow the warming climate down," Vu said. "If we want the public to have better awareness of [climate change](#), we need to have [media](#) imparting it in an immediate sense. By looking at how they have portrayed it, we can better understand how to improve it, and hopefully make it a priority that is reflected in policy."

More information: Hong Tien Vu et al, Nationalizing a global phenomenon: A study of how the press in 45 countries and territories portrays climate change, *Global Environmental Change* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2019.101942](#)

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Study examines how media around the world frame climate change news (2019, August 13) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-media-world-climate-news.html>

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