

Climate change NGOs from rich countries dominate online conversation, study shows

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As climate change threatens the world, governments and organizations from around the globe have banded together to fight its effects. Yet that collaboration has not always carried over into the online world, where

technology is often assumed to connect people and break down barriers. Research from the University of Kansas has found that nongovernment organizations, or NGOs, dedicated to fighting climate change from rich countries and certain parts of the globe are dominating the online conversation, leaving others at risk of being left out.

Climate Change Action Network International is a worldwide network of 1,300 NGOs in more than 120 countries "working to promote government and individual action to limit human-induced climate change to economically sustainable levels." Despite their stated goal of collaboration for global good, a big-data analysis of their social media use found NGOs in the global north and Oceania are the most engaged, most connected and have the largest audience for their message about combating climate change.

KU researchers analyzed a year of activity on Twitter by 482 NGOs in 79 countries, members of the international alliance found to have active Twitter accounts. The analysis showed a stark divide in who is leading the international conversation on climate change among NGOs, which are in a unique position to reach world populations on the topic as a bridge between the scientific community and public.

"When we think about politics in general, and media, leaders and reporters tend to report to people within their borders, not as much of an international audience," said Hong Tien Vu, assistant professor of journalism & [mass communications](#) and lead author of the study. "That's where NGOs can come in, by connecting and helping to establish concerted efforts to tackle [global issues](#). With the digital world of today, we need to collaborate not only in the real world but online as well. This was an ambitious project, because most research doesn't look at climate change communications from a global perspective."

The study, co-written by Hung Viet Do, computer science researcher at

Trader Interactive; and KU researchers Hyunjin Seo, associate professor of journalism & mass communications, and Yuchen Liu, doctoral student, was published in the journal *Environmental Communication*.

The researchers analyze a years' worth of Twitter activity from the 482 NGOs with active accounts, analyzing which had the most followers, which posted most frequently, which were most connected to fellow NGOs and which amplified the messages of others through means such as retweets. Those with the most activity and followers were considered thought leaders and leading the conversation, the authors wrote. The analysis revealed that the conversation leaders were all located either in the global north—or north of the equator—or Oceania, the region including Australia, New Zealand, Micronesia and Polynesia. The least connected and active nearly uniformly were located in the global south, or south of the equator.

Those divides reflect economic disparities, as the majority of the world's richest economies are located in the global north and Oceania, while the inverse is true for the global south.

The differences were especially striking given the organizations' stated goals of working together to combat climate change, and collaboration through collectives such as the Climate Change Action Network International.

"These organizations, even though they had committed to connecting in the real world, rarely interacted on Twitter, or online," Vu said. "We found their digital interaction was not that great."

The conversation leaders generally had more followers than accounts they followed, produced the most tweets and, when connected to similar NGOs, tended to be connected to others in the global north or Oceania. That is troublesome, the authors wrote, because it leaves NGOs from the

global south and their respective nations at risk of not only being excluded from the conversation but not reaching policymakers and people who can make a difference in their regions of the world. And while climate change is a global threat, it does not manifest itself the same way in every country or region, so actions or policies necessary in those being left out run the risk of not reaching those who most need to hear them.

"Climate change is a pretty abstract and broad term. Only by experiencing it can you tell what it means and how it affects your life," Vu said. "But without that type of larger communication, you can't pressure policymakers to have an impact on your nation. You can't tackle climate change as an individual, but without that greater interaction, you can't tell your story either."

Lack of resources may be one of the main factors driving the lack of interaction about climate change by NGOs in poorer nations, the researchers said. That can exacerbate the economic inequality across such regions, even though some of the nations most threatened by climate change are located in the global south. The findings echo those from KU that previously showed economic factors influence how media frame [climate](#) change coverage.

The findings show that, despite the potential of social media and Twitter specifically, NGOs dedicated to fighting [climate change](#) have not harnessed it to collaborate globally and amplify their message.

"NGOs from richer countries were able to push their message the most and not only had the most resources but the most interest. We tend to think the internet would level the playing field, but that was not the case," Vu said. "We think NGOs should work together more functionally. They want to do more. That's why they became a part of this in the real world but also need to amplify their collaboration in the

virtual world, and social media is a very powerful way to do that."

More information: Hong Tien Vu et al. Who Leads the Conversation on Climate Change?: A Study of a Global Network of NGOs on Twitter, *Environmental Communication* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/17524032.2019.1687099](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2019.1687099)

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