

Anti-climate action statements get more visibility in news coverage, study finds

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When organizations take a stand against actions to combat climate change, they get more news coverage than their pro-climate action peers, according to a new study by a Brown University researcher.

Rachel Wetts, an assistant professor in Brown's sociology department affiliated with the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society, analyzed nearly three decades of [climate](#) change-related press releases and national news articles. Approximately 14% of press releases opposing climate action or denying the science behind climate change received major national [news coverage](#), she found, compared to about 7% of press releases with pro-climate action messages.

Wetts' findings could help explain why Americans seem less concerned about the looming threat of climate change than their peers in other Western countries, she said, and why climate change policymaking in the U.S. is so often stalled.

"When you ask Americans what issues they care about most, climate change and the environment are always far down on the list," Wetts said. "The way climate change has been covered in the media could help us understand why there's so much public disengagement on this issue."

The research was published on Monday, July 27 in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Wetts began the study, she said, in an effort to understand the extent to which mainstream media coverage might factor into national perceptions on climate change.

To start, she evaluated and categorized thousands of press releases from businesses, advocacy organizations, scientific researchers, trade organizations and the public sector, published between 1985 and 2013, to determine whether the releases supported or opposed climate action. Then, she used plagiarism-detection software to scan the content of all newspaper articles published about climate change in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and U.S. Today—the three largest-circulation newspapers in the U.S.—in order to determine how many of

the press releases had received coverage.

While just 10% of the press releases Wetts found featured anti-climate action messaging, those rarer releases were twice as likely to get coverage as pro-climate action press releases, which were far more prevalent. Moreover, she found that press releases from large businesses had a much greater chance of receiving news coverage, as did [press releases](#) from groups representing business interests: About 16% of releases issued by business coalitions and trade associations got coverage, compared to about 9% from other types of organizations.

"The views of large businesses and opponents of climate action are being given an outsize opportunity to sway this debate," Wetts said.

Wetts was also surprised to discover that organizations specializing in science and technology—such as IBM, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory—were among the least likely to see their views reported in the media, with only 2.9% of their [press releases](#) receiving coverage.

"You'd think, if anything, businesses with greater scientific expertise would receive more newspaper coverage," she said. "But I found the opposite to be true."

Wetts said the results seem to support the popular opinion that mainstream news organizations often mislead readers by giving equal weight to two sides of an argument, even when one side isn't as widely believed or lacks scientific evidence.

"Journalists seem to feel that they always have to include opposing voices when they report on climate change," Wetts said. "But sometimes they give those opposing voices so much weight, they lead readers to believe that climate denial is more than a fringe stance."

News coverage that lends equal weight to those who oppose [climate action](#) does more than just alter public perception, Wetts said. It could also lead advocates and [political leaders](#) to modify the actions they take in the fight against climate change.

"The media is providing a distorted picture of how different groups feel on this issue," she said. "That can dampen political will to act on [climate change](#), with potentially serious consequences for how we as a society address—or fail to address—this issue."

More information: In climate news, statements from large businesses and opponents of climate action receive heightened visibility, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020).
www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1921526117

Provided by Brown University

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