

Media, nonprofits framing of climate change affects how people think about issue, studies show

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Climate change is an emotionally charged topic that can stir political

arguments and inspire people to take action. How people talk about it, especially news media and organizations dedicated to combating the issue, can influence how people think about climate change, a University of Kansas researcher shows in a pair of new studies.

Compelling arguments in climate change news

In one study, Hong Tien Vu, assistant professor of journalism & [mass communications](#) at KU, and co-authors examined the concept of "compelling arguments" in news media and how it affects [public opinion](#). The study analyzed data from George Mason and Yale universities that surveyed Americans twice a year between 2009 and 2015. It compared that data to media coverage of [climate change](#) from *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* published before each data collection. Previous research has focused on how coverage is communicated, but the current study incorporated sentiment and emotion of coverage and readers.

"What we wanted to see is, when incorporating emotion, if it affects how people think about climate change," Vu said. "When we factor in these variables, we can see it does in fact influence the way people view the issue."

The study appears in *The Agenda Setting Journal* and was co-written with Maxwell McCombs of the University of Texas at Austin, Annelise Russell of the University of Kentucky and Paromita Pain of the University of Nevada Reno. It analyzed three attributes of news coverage: existence, effects and solutions, or if the coverage states the problem exists, the effects it has on the planet and what can be done about it. That was compared to how people reported feeling about the issue, in positive or negative emotions, anger or sadness.

The findings showed climate change effects were mentioned most in the coverage, followed by solutions, then existence. Anger had the strongest

influence on the salience of the issue on the public, as the more coverage used anger as a way to discuss the issue, the less people felt it was important. Positive emotions in coverage correlated with the public seeing the issue's importance. Priority of the matter also increased with use of negative emotions included in coverage. Anger also played the strongest role when compared to coverage of climate change effects and solutions. When demographic information was included, only political identification had significant effect on how people felt about climate change, showing that the issue has been highly politicized in the United States.

The results show that how media cover the topic can affect how people think about it. Media and media scholarship have long subscribed to a doctrine of presenting two sides of an issue, even if they are not even or there is little argument in favor of a given side. In public affairs news of great importance, such as climate change, [news media](#) has a responsibility to properly inform the public.

"When you talk about climate change, it's pretty abstract. News media has to help people make sense of it," Vu said. "What we found was, when we incorporate emotion, the significance level is higher, or the effects of the news on public opinion is higher. Covering facts alone is important, but we clearly see when emotion is included, it has an effect on the perceptions of the public. It's a fine line to walk."

NGOs and climate change social media activism

As the study on media message framing showed, climate change has been highly politicized, which has led to some news outlets not reporting on the topic or doing so in a way that supports a given agenda. With that in mind, Vu and colleagues conducted a study in which they analyzed how global climate nonprofits communicated about the issue through Facebook.

"That makes it very difficult for people to grasp the issue," Vu said of scant news [coverage](#). "That's where I see the role of NGOs being important. Because they are on the ground, they can create resonance with audiences, including the public and policymakers. NGOs have the tools of the emerging media environment at their disposal."

The study analyzed climate change messages on Facebook from 289 climate NGOs in 18 countries. Forthcoming in the journal *Science Communication*, it was co-written with Matthew Blomberg, Hyunjin Seo, Yuchen Liu and Fatemeh Shayesteh, of KU's School of Journalism & Mass Communications, and Hung Viet Do of Trader Interactive. It analyzed the frames the organizations use in their messaging, including impact, action and efficacy. Impact refers to whether messages talked about the effects of climate change nationally or globally and if they happened in the past, are happening now or will happen in the future. Action applied to who can and should take action, while efficacy examined if messages created a sense of hope that people's actions will make a difference.

The analysis revealed that, in their messages aimed at persuasion, the NGOs used the action frame most frequently, followed by impact. Efficacy was used the least. The researchers also compared characteristics of the home nation of each NGO and the effect that had on message frames used. They found developed nations were more likely to discuss climate actions than developed countries, which focused more on impact, and framed climate change as a global issue affecting everyone.

"If we look at the issue globally, countries are very different from each other and compete with each other," Vu said. "There have been differences in how all countries should work together to combat climate change. Global climate NGOs can work across the world to bridge those differences and mobilize countries to work together. How they

communicate about [climate](#) change is, therefore, important."

Findings also showed NGOs tend to use a diagnostic frame most often. In other words, the majority of their messages focused on identifying problems more than coming up with solutions or motivating people to understand the issue or take action.

Understanding how NGOs communicate via social media is vital, given their unique ability to reach audiences of people dedicated to combating the issue and policymakers, while bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of [media](#), Vu said. He has previously conducted research about how NGOs discuss the topic on Twitter, and such analysis can help illustrate which methods are the most effective, which parts of the world are leading the conversation and how best to motivate people to take action.

More information: Hong Tien Vu et al, Deepening the concept of 'compelling arguments', *The Agenda Setting Journal* (2020). [DOI: 10.1075/asj.19009.vu](#)

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