

Majority of climate change news coverage now accurate: study

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Good news: Major print media in five countries have been representing climate change very factually, hitting a 90 percent accuracy rate in the last 15 years, according to an international study out today with University of Colorado Boulder and Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences (CIRES) authors. Scientifically accurate

coverage of man-made climate change is becoming less biased—headlining the idea that print media are no longer presenting climate change as controversy. But there's one place where the team did find biased coverage: conservative media.

"Two decades ago, print [media](#) frequently gave equal credence to both legitimate [climate](#) experts and outlier climate deniers. But we found in more recent years that the media around the globe actually got it right most of the time. However, facts now outweigh a debate," said Lucy McAllister, former Ph.D. student at the University of Colorado Boulder and lead on the study out today in *Environmental Research Letters*. "Nine out of ten media stories accurately reported the science on human contributions to climate change. It's not portrayed as a two-sided debate anymore."

The researchers from the Technological University of Munich, University of New England and the University of Colorado Boulder analyzed nearly 5,000 newspaper articles from 17 print outlets in five countries over 15 years (2005-2019). The work updates previous research by Max Boykoff, CIRES Fellow and coauthor on the new study, that examined how the journalistic norm of balanced reporting contributed to biased print media.

"Many continue to cite the 2004 Max Boykoff and Jules Boykoff article—with data ending in 2002—as evidence of persistent bias in the media. An updated analysis was critically needed," added McAllister, now a postdoctoral researcher at the Technical University of Munich.

Even though outlets around the world are becoming increasingly less biased when it comes to climate news—there's one place it still continues to fail, the team found: conservative media. Canada's National Post, Australia's Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph, and the U.K.'s Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday, all historically conservative outlets, had

significantly less accurate coverage of climate change.

World events influenced media accuracy, too: media coverage was significantly less accurate in 2010 just after the late 2009 University of East Anglia email hacking scandal and U.N. negotiations of the Copenhagen Accord, the team found. And coverage was significantly more accurate in 2015, during the time of the Paris Agreement negotiation.

"Accurate reporting in these print outlets vastly outweighed inaccurate reporting, but this is not a cause for complacency," said Boykoff, director of the Environmental Studies program at the University of Colorado Boulder. "The terrain of climate debates has largely shifted in recent years away from mere denial of human contributions to climate change to a more subtle and ongoing undermining of support for specific policies meant to substantially address climate change."

The researchers emphasize that people rarely read peer-reviewed scientific research about climate change, and are more likely to learn about it through the media. Therefore studies such as this one are critical to understand ongoing science and policy pursuits in the public sphere. There are also other competing pressures that shape our awareness of climate change—such as conversations with family and friends, entertainment and trusted leaders, the team says.

"Achieving consistently accurate media coverage is still not a silver-bullet solution to spark collective action," Boykoff added. "Our work helps provide insights on how the media are portraying human contributions to [climate change](#), yet more clearly must be done."

More information: Lucy McAllister et al, Balance as bias, resolute on the retreat? Updates & analyses of newspaper coverage in the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia and Canada over the

past 15 years, *Environmental Research Letters* (2021). DOI: [10.1088/1748-9326/ac14eb](https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ac14eb)

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