

Climate change news coverage reached all-time high, language to describe it shifting

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Front page coverage of COP26 around the world at various points of the two-week negotiations. Credit: Media and Climate Change Observatory

United States news coverage of climate change reached an all-time high

in October and November, according to recent data from the Media and Climate Change Observatory (MeCCO), an international, multi-university collaboration based at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Monitoring stories around the globe from 127 newspapers, radio and [television stations](#) in 59 countries and 13 languages, MeCCO found that during these two months—which coincided with the 2021 United Nations [climate](#) change conference in Glasgow, Scotland—U.S. media coverage was the highest it's been since November and December 2009, when the same annual conference took place in Copenhagen, Denmark.

"Climate change is no longer just a science story. It's now a political, economic, societal and cultural story," said Max Boykoff, MeCCO lead project investigator and chair of the Department of Environmental Studies.

Both [October](#) and [November](#) showed significant increases in global climate change coverage from the previous year, with newspaper coverage in October 2021 more than doubling (a 114% increase) from October 2020. This coverage in October 2021 jumped up quickly from the previous month, with newspaper coverage increasing 22% and radio up 29% from September. While newspaper coverage then plateaued in November 2021, it had increased 81% from a year prior, and global radio coverage of climate change increased a whopping 45% from October to November 2021.

In addition to the U.N. conference, emerging stories on social movements played a role in increased coverage, as well as new scientific reports published in October 2021: the annual [The Lancet Countdown report](#) about climate change impacts on human health (to which MeCCO team members Olivia Pearman and Lucy McAllister contributed); and a paper in [Science](#) which documented how land dispossession from native peoples in the U.S. has increased their vulnerability to climate change.

Changing language for a changing climate

The language of climate change is also changing, with more intense words and phrases being used in the news to describe the phenomenon, such as "climate catastrophe" and "climate emergency," according to data collected by MeCCO and language learning platform Babbel from 2006 to 2021.

MeCCO's work depends on identifying new terms being used in the news and then incorporating them into their tracking algorithms. In their work with Babbel, they chose eight search terms to track where and when they have emerged in recent years.

Between 2020 and 2021 alone, the use of "climate catastrophe" in U.S. news outlets increased by half; in the UK, use of the term tripled.

"Our language helps describe the realities of our world," said Boykoff, who is also a Fellow in the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences (CIRES).

Meanwhile, the terms "global warming" and "greenhouse effect" have been invoked less frequently. At least one outlet, The Guardian, even changed its official style guide in 2019, preferring the terms "global heating" and "climate emergency, crisis or breakdown" over "global warming" and "climate change," respectively.

The term "climate change" however, is not disappearing—it's just that other terms are increasing, said Boykoff.

He notes that it's difficult to draw a straight line between more media coverage and increased action on climate change. Yet the news is a major way we understand the world going on around us, and [political actors](#) also use media attention to gauge public pressures and interests, he

said.

"Increased media attention is part of a story of increased engagement and action," said Boykoff.

MeCCO will release a year-long look at climate change in the news in 2021 in January 2022, its fifth annual summary/explainer of this type. The data MeCCO uses to compile their reports are set up as open-source databases through CU Boulder Libraries, which are available to anyone free of charge: academics, journalists and the public alike.

MeCCO members also authored a paper in *The Lancet* in January of 2021, "[COVID-19 media coverage decreasing despite deepening crisis](#)," which uses the same methods to analyze media coverage of COVID-19. With more resources and funding, MeCCO could use their existing network to glean valuable insights on [media coverage](#) of the pandemic like they have been tracking and analyzing [climate change](#) news.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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