

Newspapers lose their balance on climate coverage

December 1 2011

The first of a two-part analysis of Australian press coverage of climate change, *A Sceptical Climate*, is based on a comprehensive review of 3971 media articles published in ten Australian newspapers on the topic of climate change policy from February to July this year.

Overall it found negative coverage of the carbon policy outweighed positive coverage by 73 per cent to 27 per cent.

Report author Professor Wendy Bacon said the overall result was driven by News Ltd group publications (82 per cent negative versus 18 per cent positive), compared to a more balanced result for the Fairfax press (57 per cent positive articles outweighing 43 per cent negative).

The newspapers chosen were: The Australian, The Age/Sunday Age, The Sydney Morning Herald/Sun Herald (SMH), The Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph, Herald Sun, The Advertiser, Courier Mail/Sunday Mail, The Northern Territory News, The Mercury and The West Australian.

"The results for News Ltd, particularly its two biggest tabloids – The Herald Sun and Daily Telegraph – indicate a very strong stance against the carbon policy adopted by a company that controls most Australian metropolitan newspapers and the only general national daily," Professor Bacon said.

"While the impact of columnists is considerable, negative coverage

cannot be attributed merely to several well-published conservative personalities. Bias is an editorial accomplishment achieved through a variety of journalistic techniques included headlining, the selection and prominence of topics and sources, structuring and editing of stories, selection and promotion of commentators, editorials and cartoons or other visuals.

"The issue is not one of free speech or the right of a few individuals to push their ideas but the market power of a powerful company to build support for particular policies and ideas.

"The response of media companies to the government's Independent Media Inquiry has been that the market, if left to itself, can be trusted to deliver a quality media outcome for Australia.

"As I have already argued in a submission to the inquiry, the quality of reporting on the critical issue of climate change provides a litmus test in seeking answers to the inquiry's terms of reference. The evidence provided in this report suggests we may have a case of market failure."

Further points from the report:

- All papers contained some positive and a substantial amount of neutral material. The highest level of neutral articles was found in The Age and The Hobart Mercury, the lowest level was found in The Northern Territory News and The Daily Telegraph.
- The Age was more positive (67 per cent) rather than negative towards the policy than any other newspaper. The Daily Telegraph was the most negative (89 per cent) rather than positive of newspapers.
- Headlines were less balanced than the actual content of articles; and neutral articles were more likely to be headlined negative (41 per cent) than positive (19 per cent)

- The Australian gave far more space to the coverage of climate change than any other newspaper. Its articles were coded 47 per cent negative, 44 per cent neutral and nine per cent positive. When neutrals were discounted, there were 84 per cent negative articles compared to 17 per cent positive.

The ACIJ's research work on [climate change](#) is part of the Global Environmental Journalism Initiative, a partnership of nine tertiary institutions in Australia and Europe working on research and teaching about the environment and media.

The second part of this research project, examining media reporting of climate science, will be released next week. The research was conducted with support from the Australian Conservation Foundation.

More information: datasearch2.uts.edu.au/acij/informationservices/ail.cfm?ItemId=29219

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

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