The Role of Media in Global Warming

Jonah G Choe

College of the Holy Cross

Abstract

 The public understanding of global warming does not come from the classroom, it comes from the media. Its role in how we obtain information about the climate change issue is a vital one. Newspapers, magazines, television, and social media provide that essential information, but how big of an impact does it have on how we view certain issues? Experts say Americans are not getting the correct information to assess the current status of our situation and so this is hindering our views on the issue of global warming. Comprehending the information we receive in any form of media with a critical eye is as crucial as acting to combat global warming.

 **I. Introduction: So what about the media?**

 There are two methods to how people become informed on the issue of climate change. The first is through formal education either through lecture or in the classroom. For those who work for a living, have the obstacle of not being in an academic setting or making the effort to be educated in the subject matter. The alternative to this is the media. The primary source for those educated and uneducated on climate change is newspapers, television, magazines, social media, et cetera. Although the ignorance of society as a whole is partly to blame for the controversy over the issue of climate change, that is not the main proponent. The press, politicians, and large corporations have the biggest impact and deserve the blame.

 The purpose of this paper is the challenge readers to observe the media with a critical eye constantly. The information we receive is not always true, unbiased, or simply informative. Unfortunately the benefit of the doubt is given to the media because they receive the information first and is responsible for distributing it; however, they have an underlying agenda.

 The cost of maintaining a media corporation is very high. The funding that is required from advertisements is often too daunting for media outlets and as a result they receive funding from other sources. These other sources consist of big name corporations, but they come with certain conditions. If a big news story would come out against the use of gasoline because of the immense impact it has on the environment, that particular media source would most likely undercover the story because of its big corporation sponsor. Not only does this scenario happen in reality, it happens with all news sources not just one. The same instance happens with politicians as well. This vicious cycle of corporations paying media sources to downplay the magnitude of these important studies and happenings on global warming will not stop unless the viewer, reader, and human being do something about it.

 **II. The media and its molding powers**

The two questions we need to ask ourselves: are we getting the right information and are we getting right amount of it? Gelbspan in *Boiling Point* emphasizes his views of how the media hinders the information they receive.

 The culture of journalism is, basically, a political culture that is not particularly hospitable—that is, in fact, institutionally arrogant– toward nonpolitical areas of coverage. If the press were disposed to look beyond…That contrast is apparent in the difference between the coverage of the climate crisis in the American press and the news media in other countries. (Gelbspan, 2004, p.70)

Journalism wants to give both sides of the story, much like a political issue. Climate change and many others issues should not be presented in this manner. There is hard evidence in the case against global warming and the vast majority of skeptics simply argue that the evidence for climate change is insufficient. Yet journalists still convey the same amount of information for each side of the issue. This journalistic balance is not righteous, it is downright lazy. A reporter should get the hard evidence and understand the story from each side then report the story rather than saying whatever the “expert” has to say. Here’s an analogy I want to convey: How many of you know that “diabetes” is a problem in our country? There is such a surge against diabetes and no media coverage of studies saying, we can ignore diabetes. The media is to thank for this lack of parallelism in coverage of two issues in our country and world.

 Gelbspan then looks at the issue of whether the population of the U.S. is getting enough of the information we need. A study is mentioned to back up his point that the press simply does not cover climate change as much as other countries. Gelbspan asserts:

[O]ne recent study compared the attention given to the climate by the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times to three major newspapers in Britain and Germany. According to a weighted sampling between September 1999 and March 2000, the coverage in Britain was almost twice that of the press in the United States. (Gelbspan, 2004, p.70)

The media acknowledges the existence of global warming even as they minimize its scope and urgency. By underreporting story after story, the press is failing to move the conversation toward solutions and, in the process, ignoring the positive potential embedded in the action against the climate crisis.

 **III. Conclusion**

As a world that sustains 7 billion people, the prospective of saving the earth from our harmful selves is daunting. However, with the fast and growing media, spreading information has become much easier than before and so solving our dilemmas and problem have and will become easier. If a person sees that there is an intellectually honest solution, then and only then, will he or she deny that hopelessness and bad news. Absent that realization, acceptance is the inevitable response.

**Supplementary Information**

 **I. Information on sample**

The study was conducted on the College of the Holy Cross campus. The sample consisted of 90 freshman and sophomore students in Mulledy Hall. The sample was 29% male, 71% female, 34% being formally educated in climate change, and 66% not formally educated.

 **II. Numeracy**

 The subjects were tested on their proficiency in understanding math, science, and media. Once the questions were corrected, subjects were categorized into highly literate, moderately literate, illiterate. The math and science scores were combined while the media scores were observed independently. We asked the subjects a total of nine questions that were used in previous studies (Kahan 2011).

Science Literacy Questions:

It is the father’s gene that decides whether the baby is a boy or a girl. [true/false]

How long does it take for the Earth to go around the Sun? [one day, one month, one year]

Does the Earth go around the Sun, or does the Sun go around the Earth?

Electrons are smaller than atoms. [true/false]

Lasers work by focusing sound waves. [true/false]

All radioactivity is man-made. [true/false]

Math Literacy Questions:

Imagine that we roll a fair, six-sided die 1,000 times. (That would mean that we roll one die from a pair of dice.) Out of 1,000 rolls, how many times do you think the die would come up as an even number?

A. 1,000 B. 500 C. 400 D. 300 E. 0

If Person A’s risk of getting a disease is 1% in ten years, and Person B’s risk is double that of A’s, what is B’s risk?

1. 0.5 % B. 1% C. 2% D. 4% E. 0.25%

A bat and a ball cost $1.10 in total. The bat costs $1.00 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?

Media Literacy:

How often do you read the newspaper?

Not at all Sometimes Often Everyday

How often do you read the news online?

Not at all Sometimes Often Everyday

How often do you watch the news?

Not at all Sometimes Often Everyday

How often do you read magazines?

Not at all Sometimes Often Everyday

Do you believe you are informed about the issue of global warming from the media?

Not at all Somewhat Informed Informed Very Informed

Have you been educated in the area of climate change?

Yes No

 **III. Climate Change Risk Perception Scale**

 These questions were used to measure the student’s views on the risk of climate change. Scores were added together, the higher the number, the stronger the feeling towards the risk. Then once the scores were added, assigned numbers were cateogirzed into: greatest risk perception, moderate risk perception, some risk perception, no risk perception.

Climate Change:

How much of an impact do humans have on global climate change?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Least Most

How big of a threat is global climate change to the survival of humans?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

 **IV. Results**



**Figure 1. Impact of being educated versus uneducated in climate change.** N=90. The risk perception of those educated in the area of climate change was no different than those that were not. Those who were educated SD = 2.1, N = 59. Those who were not educated SD = 2.6, N = 31.

**Figure 2. Media’s influence on climate-change risk perceptions.** Derived from assigning categories of climate-change risk perceptions on a scale of 1-4 (1 being the lowest, 4 being the highest). N=90. Scores were arranged from low media literacy to high media literacy.

References

 Gelbspan, R. (2004). *Boiling Point* (pp. 67-85). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Hoggan, J. (2009). *Climate Cover-Up: The Crusade To Deny Global Warming*. Vancouver, Canada: Greystone Books.

Kahan, D. M., Peters, E., Braman, D., Wittlin, M., Ouellette, L., & Mandel, G. (2011). *The Tragedy of the Risk-Perception Commons: Culture Conflict, Rationality Conflict, and Climate Change*. Retrieved April 18, 2013

Michaels, P. J. (2004). *Meltdown: The Predictable Distortion of Global Warming By Scientists, Politicians, and the Media*. Washington, DC: Cato Institute. Retrieved April 18, 2013, from Holy Cross Libraries.