

# **Real News, Fake News: Media's Influence of Public Opinion on Climate Change**

Sydney Taylor, Cormier Honors College, Longwood University  
Grace Johnston, Cormier Honors College, Longwood University

## **Abstract**

There is a dependence on media outlets such as news stations or social media to make sense of the constant barrage of information on political, global, and environmental issues presented to the public. What needs to be questioned is the validity of this information, and how that information is covered, especially when it is about controversial issues like climate change. The public's view of climate change is shaped by the media that they consume- news outlets on television, online journals or articles, and social media.

For this project, the role of the media in socially constructing climate change and other environmental issues was researched using scholarly and non-scholarly sources. What we found is that there are gatekeepers that control and manipulate how information is presented in the media- the federal and local governments, advertisers, groups with certain political agendas, etc. In the media, especially social media, there is a free flow of information. This project confirmed that social media can and does enable either side of the global climate change debate (includes advocates and deniers). Therefore, people should be aware and exercise caution in who or what they use as their sources of information for these important issues.

## **Introduction**

The public's opinions on climate change are influenced by the media in which they consume- television news outlets, online journals and articles, and social media. In an attempt to study how extreme the correlation between public opinion and the influence made by the media, we conducted research using scholarly and non-scholarly sources online to congregate the information into one place. Our motivation of study was to inform the public about misinformation, and to learn about just how influential misinformation can be in the news and in social media.

## **Methodology**

We conducted research on previous research that has already been done on media impact on the perspective of global climate change. We searched the following terms to conduct our research: "News media, Journalism, Perspective, Opinion, Climate Change, Influence, People."

## **Discussion**

*Who lands where on the issue of climate change?*

Research conducted in the past has concluded that there is an overall lack of knowledge about climate change, which is a factor in creating skepticism or outright denial of the issues in general. The media makes an effort to report more often on skeptics and skeptical viewpoints in a disproportionate amount, compared to reporting on a more factual basis.

There are four types of people that can be placed on a spectrum, according to Jones' journal article, *Leading the Way to Compromise? Cultural Theory and Climate Change Opinion* (2011). These types of people and their ideologies are individualists, egalitarians, hierarchs, and fatalists (Jones, 2011). A survey conducted by this researcher found that the opinions of certain types of people chiefly depend on the individual's view on how society should be run and structured overall -- should the federal government mandate eco-friendly practices? Is it humans that create these climate change issues, or are they occurring naturally, more so than unnaturally?

Egalitarians, according to the data, find that climate change is a more serious issue to them, and requires human intervention in order to halt and reverse the effects of climate change. Individualists, on the other hand, do believe that it's an issue, but do not believe humans should intervene. Rather, humans should retreat from working on the environment and leave it untouched, so nature can heal itself. Egalitarians and hierarchs believe in climate change for different reasons: egalitarians believe it is humanity's duty to preserve the planet they stand on because it should simply be this way without incentive, but hierarchs do not believe climate change is as big of an issue as egalitarians believe, and are not as interested in working to reverse the effects. They believe that there must be a social hierarchy in place, where certain people must belong in certain social circles. Individualists believe in a more self-focused lifestyle, and are not as interested in climate change as an overarching issue, because if it does not affect them directly, it does not interest them.

This spectrum analysis aids in creating a less two-dimensional view of how one would categorize which people, and which people believe which things. The general trend is, the more conservative someone is, the less likely they would be interested in the topic of climate change -- but this does not always mean outright denial, or being completely disinterested. One must consider many different sides of many stories, in order to learn where the larger population lies on this topic.

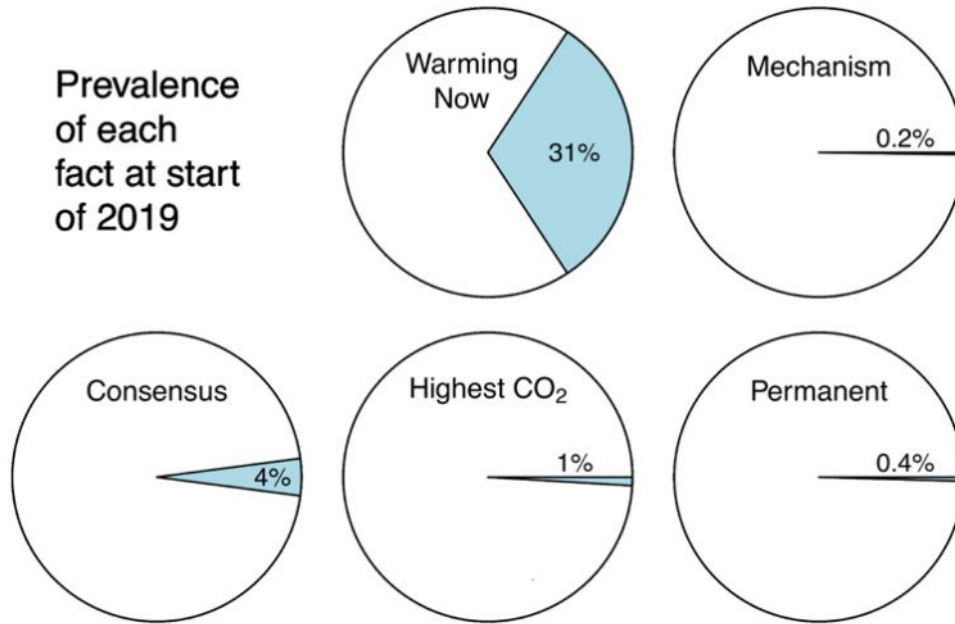
*Gatekeeping Information*

The existence of the media allows a constant, free flow of information among like-minded individuals. This flow of information can be selected, altered, and shaped before being presented to the public, so its validity is put into question. Research shows that mass media can promote or inhibit social change by manipulating the information presented and that few know the truth of controversial issues, such as climate change. The process of manipulating the information that is presented is known as gatekeeping. There is no one person or group that gatekeeps what gets shown to the public, each plays their own role: journalists, reporters,

advertisers, groups with political agendas, and local and federal governments. In journalism, the available stories to report are reviewed and 75% of the potential news coverage are rejected (Dispensa & Brulle, 2003). After the information is reviewed, the news corporation decides what is covered and how it is covered. A story that is considered to be “newsworthy” will be publicly acknowledged, be a major topic of discussion, and be written out by journalists to be a more compelling story (Dispensa & Brulle, 2003). Those qualities will gain the attention of the media. Journalists are more likely to go to leaders of larger organizations and businesses as their primary source which often leads to partial information or one-sided stories. Bigger businesses and organizations, through their relationship with journalism, dominate the media and have their interests presented which gives the smaller business fewer chances to contribute (Dispensa & Brulle, 2003). Information that threatens the interests or agendas of larger organizations will not be covered in the media.

### *Media Coverage of Information*

The media gatekeepers have a strong influence on the information presented in the news. Most of the partial truths that are displayed makes up about 1% of those scientists and individuals that debate against climate change. Studies have shown that the little coverage that is reported on climate change is “fragmented and confusing” (Dispensa & Brulle, 2003). Sanders (2019) wrote an article questioning the media coverage of climate change in *The New York Times*. Sanders used data collected from the analysis of Romps and Retzinger at Berkeley. This article looks at the basic facts of climate change that receive little attention: climate change is happening now, the mechanism behind climate change, that we are experiencing higher levels of carbon dioxide by the burning of fossil fuels, the consensus among 99% of the scientific community that it is due to human activity, and that climate change is permanent. This lack of coverage for the basic facts creates the lack of knowledge for a large percentage of the general public. The mention of these basic facts are few since the 1980s: 31% articles mention climate change now, 0.2 % articles mention the mechanism behind climate change, only 1% articles mention the experience of high levels of carbon dioxide, 4% articles mention the scientific consensus, and 0.4% of the articles mention that climate change is permanent (Sanders, 2019). The U.S. media limits exposure of these facts to the public and tends to distort the constant environmental changes contrary to other countries’ presentations and scientific views of the issue (Dispensa & Brulle, 2003).



The percentage of climate change articles in the *New York Times* since 1980 that mention five basic facts about global warming. (Graphic by David Romps, UC Berkeley)

(Sanders, 2019)

### *Perceptions and Beliefs of Climate Change*

An analysis report by Feldman, et. al (2010) on a survey conducted by Yale Project on Climate Change and the George Mason University Center of Climate Change Communication indicated that the younger generations should be more engaged and concerned with the issue of climate change than the older generations of Americans. The survey found that Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 have different views on climate change as well as being more disengaged when compared to their older counterparts. Data was collected on the following: which group was more engaged and concerned about climate change, younger adults and their beliefs about causation of climate change, the outlook of climate change of younger generations than their counterparts, if personal behavior change will reduce effects of climate change, which generation is open to new information, and who they trust to receive information from.

According to the data, young Americans under the age of 35 are less likely than their counterparts to have even thought about climate change, with 22% of these folks falling into this category. This leaves only 38% of 18-34 years old having either thought about climate change “a little” or “a lot” in relation to the 51% of 35-49 years old individuals and the 44% of ages 60 and older (Feldman et. al, 2010). Younger Americans are more convinced that climate change is caused by human action and not by naturally occurring environmental changes. Data also shows that more than two-thirds of young adults say that more information is needed on climate change, but are less likely to need “a lot” of information. About 34% of those young adults concur that

there is a possibility that they would change their view on climate change (Feldman et. al, 2010). In order for their view to change, they must rely on trusted sources. A large percentage (82%) of the young adults surveyed trusted scientists as a reliable source. One-third of Americans trust the mainstream media as a source of information, but both 18-34 year olds and 60+ years old are less likely to view the news media as a trusted source (Feldman et. al, 2010).

*Social media and climate change (Anderson, 2017)*

Climate change also finds a home on many different types of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, forums online, among others (Anderson, 2017). The nature of these discussions can vary dramatically, depending on which areas one would go looking for information -- but generally, the most common “information” that’s found, is actually the opinions of groups of individuals. There is a small minority of Americans who decide to discuss issues about climate change online: about 7% will share information they find over Twitter or Facebook, and 6% of Americans will post comments under news articles about global warming or climate change (Anderson, 2017).

It’s more common to find discussions about climate change and global warming in person, where about 35% of Americans will speak face to face about these issues at least every now and then (Anderson, 2017). However, the discussions become more concentrated when the issue of climate change becomes something more personal to individuals, such as when they experience harsh weather events that affect themselves and their local community. In these times, many people, a much larger chunk of about 30% of people in the United States, will take their discussions online, talking about the kind of weather they’ve experienced, and consequently segway into discussions about climate change.

Discussions online typically only collect many similarly opinionated individuals into one space, however, and therefore do not create any form of debate or discussion between individuals who disagree on the prevalence of climate change (Anderson, 2017). Online debates are much rarer than discussions between people who agree. Because of this, many folks will, depending on what sorts of arguments they already believed in, convene with others of a similar ideology, and sometimes mobilize or attempt to take action, as social media provides them with the space and ability to do so.

## **Conclusion**

Our research has largely confirmed our original argument that the media and news outlets do indeed attempt to persuade the public into believing one thing or another. The public consumes what they originally agreed with, and sometimes, those who are constantly consuming only what they believe in will become an extreme form of this belief. We encourage all people to stay watchful and unbiased when finding information about climate change, because without caution, misinformation and opinions without research run rampant.

## *Limitations*

Most definitely, we would not have been able to cover every kind of argument for or against our point, so consequently we would not have every side of the story. We may advise caution, and offer information in order for people to draw their own conclusions, but we are unable to provide everything. Thus, we urge others to research the issue of climate change for themselves, train themselves to spot bias in news articles, identify facts from fiction in social media, and stay as informed and unbiased as they are able to be.

### References

- Dispensa, J. M., & Bruelle, R. J. (2003). Media's social construction of environmental issues: Focus on global warming - A comparative study. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23 (10), 74-105. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Robert\\_Brulle/publication/242022207\\_Media's\\_Social\\_Construction\\_of\\_Environmental\\_Issues\\_Focus\\_on\\_Global\\_Warming-A\\_Comparative\\_Study/links/54d15b960cf28959aa7ae205/Medias-Social-Construction-of-Environmental-Issues-Focus-on-Global-Warming-A-Comparative-Study.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Robert_Brulle/publication/242022207_Media's_Social_Construction_of_Environmental_Issues_Focus_on_Global_Warming-A_Comparative_Study/links/54d15b960cf28959aa7ae205/Medias-Social-Construction-of-Environmental-Issues-Focus-on-Global-Warming-A-Comparative-Study.pdf)
- Feldman, L., Nisbet, M. C., Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E. (2010). The climate change generation? Survey analysis of the perceptions and beliefs of young americans. Retrieved from <https://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication-OFF/files/YouthJan2010.pdf>
- Sanders, R. (2019). In media coverage of climate change, where are the facts? Retrieved from <https://news.berkeley.edu/2019/09/19/in-media-coverage-of-climate-change-where-are-the-facts/>
- Jones, Michael D. (2011). Leading the Way to Compromise? Cultural Theory and Climate Change Opinion. *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 4. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41319957>
- Anderson, A.A. (2017). *Effects of Social Media Use on Climate Change Opinion, Knowledge, and Behavior*. Oxford University Press USA. Retrieved from <https://oxfordre.com/climatescience/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228620-e-369?print=pdf>