

Climate Change and Public Opinion

Preamble

“The UK’s Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research brings together scientists, economists, engineers and social scientists, who together are working to develop sustainable responses to climate change through trans-disciplinary research and dialogue on both a national and international level - not just within the research community, but also with business leaders, policy advisors, the media and the public in general.”

(Extract from: www.tyndall.ac.uk/general/gen_info.shtml)

Introduction

The above statement indicates that the Tyndall Centre recognises the importance of addressing:

- the societal processes involved in the shaping of public opinion and knowledge of climate change;
- how government policy on climate change develops and evolves in response to pressure and influence from various sectors of society.

The present document, then, is a broad outline of a new research theme whose aim is to shed light on these two interlinked phenomena. Under the auspices of this interdisciplinary research theme it is proposed that a number of projects would be undertaken, tackling various facets of the problem. These projects should complement each other and underpin the research theme as a whole.

One major component to be analysed is the mainstream media. Understanding the mainstream media – in particular, its institutional structure, systemic limitations and actual performance on climate change coverage – is a prerequisite for understanding how the public debate on climate change is shaped. This, in turn, affords insight into how government policy on climate change is developed and implemented, thus linking into the overarching research theme. Although some work has been undertaken, media analysis of climate change coverage has been a significantly overlooked area of research to date. I therefore outline a specific proposal below that focuses on the links between climate change and the media.

Research theme strands

Analysis of complex social issues involves an initial framing process: first, the identification of the principal ‘actors’ or system components involved; then, the definition of the respective nature of these components and the interactions between them. In the present context of climate change and society, it would seem reasonable to examine the roles played by various actors such as local and central government, the business community (a number of different industry sectors), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the media, and ‘the public’ as a whole.

A helpful means of grasping the proposed research theme, using terminology from communications research, is as follows. In the climate debate there are certain ‘inputs’ – such as scientific results (e.g. reports published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) as well as pronouncements - both public and internal - from NGOs, governments and business organisations. These inputs are processed, filtered and reformulated by media channels (broadcasters, newspapers, internet sites, books, etc.). There are then subsequent

impacts on public knowledge and opinion which a full research programme would need to estimate (e.g. by means of public surveys).

The above characterisation clearly simplifies a multi-faceted and dynamic system. In this first-order description I have left out feedback loops such as how public concern might be exerted upon government and thus influence the shaping of climate-related policy. Other likely significant factors have similarly been omitted here, such as the role of the education system in shaping the 'public mind'. Specific projects within the overarching theme would tackle these factors and their relationship to climate and society. However, the trinity of 'inputs', 'transformative processes' and 'impacts' gives an overview of the proposed research theme.

A coherent research agenda would therefore emphasise the following key strands:

- Utilising the fields of communications research and discourse analysis, examine public pronouncements - and, where possible, internal documents - from relevant sectors: scientists, government, corporations, media organisations, NGOs, others.
- Examine various sectors of the mainstream media - particularly its institutional structure, systemic limitations and actual performance in terms of coverage of climate change.
- Examine existing opinion poll data and evaluate what it says about both public belief and opinion on climate.
- Over several decades, opinion polls have consistently revealed a significant divergence between public attitudes and government policy on a wide range of issues, with public opinion consistently adopting more critical and/or progressive positions than the government: examine this in the context of climate change and related subjects, e.g. transport policy, energy policy.
- Undertake new quantitative and qualitative public opinion surveys with specific questions relevant to the present research theme.
- Examine the education system – at primary, secondary and tertiary levels – and attempt to evaluate and understand its role in the shaping of public opinion about society and climate change.
- Examine the public relations industry – its investors, institutional and other links – and compare its agenda with what people believe about climate change and which policy options/solutions they typically endorse.
- Investigate the conflict and interplay in the climate arena between government and business policies on the one hand, and evolving strategies of relevant NGOs on the other.
- Investigate so-called 'revolving door' links between government and industry, and possible impacts on climate thinking and policy.

Closing remarks

The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ross Gelbspan once noted that news stories about climate change 'generally evoke an eerie silence' (Gelbspan, 'The Heat is On', Perseus Books, 1998, p. 172). By this he meant that there is typically very little, if any, sustained follow-up on substantive action that could be taken by the various sectors of society. One objective of the proposed research theme is to help explain *why* news stories about climate change might

'evoke an eerie silence'. Another objective is to suggest mechanisms for overcoming this problem. In other words, how might one improve public understanding of climate change and associated threats to society, and thereby encourage wider public participation in drawing up societal responses to climate change.

As is clear from the remit of the Tyndall Centre, there is a pressing need for interdisciplinary research into climate issues, society and the shaping of public opinion and knowledge. Indeed, such research may well enable the Tyndall Centre to attain a higher public profile and achieve greater impact in its work.

Some relevant reading

Beder, Sharon, *Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism*, Green Books, 1997.

Hansen, A., (editor), *The Mass Media and Environmental Issues. Studies in Communication and Society*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1993.

Hargreaves, Ian, Justin Lewis and Tammy Speers, *Towards a better map: Science, the public and the media*, Economic And Social Research Council, 2003.

Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Pantheon, New York, 1988.

Lewis, Justin, *Constructing Public Opinion*, Columbia University Press, 2001.

Smith, J. (editor), *The Daily Globe: Environmental Change, the Public and the Media*, Earthscan, 2000.

Proposed Project Within Above Theme: The Role of the Media in Shaping Public Debate On Climate Change

Introduction

Understanding the mainstream media - particularly its institutional structure, limitations and actual performance - is a prerequisite for understanding how the public debate on climate change is shaped. This, in turn, affords insight into aspects of how policy on climate change is developed and implemented. The principal aim of the present proposal is to examine climate change coverage in the media: how well is the subject covered, what is the range of debate and how does it impact on public understanding of salient issues. A secondary aim - feeding into the overarching research theme - is to assess how one might improve public understanding of climate change and associated threats to society, and thereby encourage wider public participation in drawing up societal responses to climate change.

Analysis of the media

There is a rich source of media analyses and methodologies to draw upon here from a number of fields of study including political economy, communication theory and critical discourse analysis. We will assess these, select the most appropriate approaches, and apply them to the case of the UK mainstream media. One media model that may be relevant here is the “moral panic” model, as occasionally applied to sudden eruptions of concern about social problems (*Moral Panics and the Media*, Chas Critcher, OUP, 2003). A second useful tool to aid understanding of media structure and performance is the propaganda model developed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (*Manufacturing Consent*, Pantheon, New York, 1988). This model of media behaviour and performance describes a number of news ‘filters’ that regulate what news is ‘fit to print’ or broadcast. Discourse types of media analysis and methodology will provide a third, text-based, approach to the material (e.g. *The Media and The Making of History*, John Theobald, Ashgate, 2004).

Application to climate change debate

An institutional analysis of mainstream media can help to explain the framing of environmental reporting and discussion in the public sphere (e.g. *The Hack and Flack Machine*, David Cromwell, New Internationalist, October 2000; www.newint.org/issue328/essay.htm). Cromwell’s argument was expanded at greater length in the book *Private Planet* (Jon Carpenter Publishing, 2001). More recently, a report by researchers at Cardiff University School of Journalism examined the link between science, journalism and the public using three examples: the MMR controversy, genetics and climate change (*Towards a better map: Science, the public and the media*, Ian Hargreaves, Justin Lewis and Tammy Speers, Economic And Social Research Council, 2003). Such examples aside, there has actually been relatively little investigation to date into how the media cover (or ignore) climate change and how public opinion is shaped. The proposed project is therefore timely, relevant and important.

Where the media *do* address likely future climate change scenarios, or extreme weather events, there tends to be a lack of journalistic probing into the substantive questions of how anthropogenic climate change might be related to economic, social and political conditions;

what could be done to mitigate, or adapt to, climate change; and how, where, and why any blockages might occur in society to taking effective action.

Outline of project proposal

The following provides a broad outline and is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. In essence, the study will entail monitoring of mainstream media coverage, coding for specific elements in the reporting, followed by analysis to try to understand the extent and nature of the climate coverage in mainstream journalism. This is a well-established and successful approach to media analysis in general.

The focus of the study will be climate-related strategic events (e.g. international climate conventions and major climate/weather events such as El Niño, flooding or droughts) as well as the publication of major climate-related documents, reports and books, investigating how these are treated in the media over a specific time period.

Monitor a selection of British tabloid and broadsheet newspapers for climate-related stories over a specific period, e.g. Oct 2004 - Mar 2006 (using the LexisNexis database). Also, record a sample of major TV and radio news programmes such as BBC and ITN news bulletins, Radio 4 *Today* programme, *Panorama*, etc.

Code each climate change story for whether it includes mention of:

- Causes of climate change
- Effects of climate change
- Definition of greenhouse effect
- Mention of greenhouse gases
- Carbon emissions/fossil fuels/coal/natural gas/oil explicitly as causes
- Actions the public can take to avoid and/or cope with climate change
- Actions that corporations, investors and specific industry sectors can take
- Reporting of business lobbying
- Reporting of NGO lobbying
- Discussion of Kyoto Protocol
- Discussion of 'contraction and convergence' (see www.gci.org.uk)
- Discussion of air transport
- Discussion of the global economy and trade patterns
- Discussion of media coverage

On the basis of the above, test to what extent the nature of media reporting of climate change can be explained by a selection of media models, and its agendas or practices revealed by text analysis.

Evaluate, and where appropriate propose improvements or alternatives to, the models and analytical approaches.

Conduct interviews with a number of mainstream and 'alternative' journalists. This will provide critical dialogue, complementing the above analysis.

Explore strategies for influencing mainstream media coverage of climate, and consider possibilities afforded by alternative media, e.g. independent radio, small book publishers, the internet.

Project outputs

These will include specialist papers in the peer-reviewed literature as well as articles in the mainstream press, hopefully tied with interviews in local and national newspapers, as well as radio and television broadcasts. The research should form the basis for at least one PhD study, possibly linked with at least one post-doc position. Results, including ongoing progress, should also be available via the web (obviously at the Tyndall Centre website if conducted with Tyndall support).

Collaborators and advisors

Members of the Tyndall Centre research community and beyond, including Dr. Eric Herring (University of Bristol, politics), Dr. David Miller (Stirling University Media Institute), David Traynier (Stirling University), Dr. John Theobald (Southampton Institute, languages and European studies), Prof. Richard Keeble (Lincoln University, journalism), Prof. Greg Philo (Glasgow University Media Group), Prof. Justin Lewis (University of Cardiff, journalism).

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