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## Media attention for climate change around the world: A comparative analysis of newspaper coverage in 27 countries

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### ABSTRACT

Climate change is a global phenomenon, and its outcomes affect societies around the world. So far, however, studies on media representations of climate change have mostly concentrated on Western societies. This paper goes beyond this limited geographical scope by presenting a comparative analysis of issue attention in 27 countries. The sample includes, among others, countries that have committed themselves to greenhouse gas emission reductions under the Kyoto Protocol such as Germany as well as countries that are strongly affected by the consequences of climate change like India. In a first step, it describes the development of media attention for climate change in these countries from 1996 to 2010. Second, it compares the amount of media attention and explores whether it corresponds with indicators measuring the relevance of climate change and climate policies for a country. The analyses show that climate change coverage has increased in all countries. Still, overall media attention levels, as well as the extent of growth over time, differ strongly between countries. Media attention is especially high in carbon dependent countries with commitments under the Kyoto Protocol.

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### 1. Introduction: media coverage of a global problem

Anthropogenic climate change is a global problem. It is caused by various human activities around the world, such as transportation, electricity consumption and the breeding of livestock. Greenhouse gases produced by these activities, no matter whether in Texas or in Beijing, contribute to an increase in average temperatures on all continents and to global changes in climatic conditions, which then have impacts on both the natural and social world (IPCC, 2007, p. 10ff; Dryzek et al., 2011). Accordingly, political responses and solutions are sought globally. Political institutions worldwide and on the international level are concerned with the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change. The international level is of special relevance for mitigating climate change, because the problem poses a social dilemma, a “drama of the commons” on a global scale (Dietz et al., 2003). Actors profit individually from greenhouse gas-producing activities, whereas they would gain only a fraction of the benefits from unilateral mitigation efforts causing abatement costs. Even worse, “their sacrifice may be futile if other actors do not exhibit similar restraint” (Harrison and Sundstrom, 2007, p. 1). The United

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change from 1992 and the resulting international process with regular international climate summits (the so-called Conferences of the Parties, COP) represent an attempt to tackle this situation by international coordination – with 194 of the world’s 206 states participating (Gupta, 2010).

The news media are the central “interpretative system” of modern societies (Peters and Heinrichs, 2005, p. 2), and thus crucial for the societal uptake of climate change and climate politics. Firstly, they are central agents for *raising awareness and disseminating information*. As global climate change lies beyond the life-world and biographical horizons of most people (Moser, 2010; Neverla and Schäfer, 2012), knowledge about it is mainly disseminated via public communication. Due to their high circulation and general audience, mass media are pivotal in this latter regard. Correspondingly, several studies have shown that the “public draws most of its knowledge” (Anderson, 2011, p. 535) about the issue from the mass media (e.g. Schäfer, 2012; Ryghaug et al., 2011). Secondly, mass media constitute a central forum for the *discussion and legitimation of climate governance* (Schneider et al., 2007, p. 136; Nanz and Steffek, 2004, p. 321). Mass media debates represent an important element of political opinion formation in which various societal actors like environmental organizations, business associations, and party and government representatives take part (Steffek, 2009, p. 315). Ideally, such a public, communicative exchange may facilitate balancing different

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interests and reaching an understanding on the objectives of (global) climate governance and the different ways of pursuing them (Bovenkerk and Brom, 2012, p. 96). Conflicts may, however, also persist. In this case, mass media coverage at least helps to make transparent the various positions on the issue (Peters, 2008, p. 131). For decision makers, mass media debates constitute one important indicator for the importance of a topic and for related societal views and preferences (Kriesi, 2001, p. 3; van Aelst and Walgrave, 2011, p. 298f). Therefore, mass media coverage of climate change may create a situation “where it is conducive for governments to act, or hard for them not to act in the face of perceived pressure to initiate a policy response” (Newell, 2000, p. 94).

However, has the global phenomenon of climate change been taken up in the mass media of countries around the world, and if so, to what extent? This question cannot yet be answered sufficiently. There is “a growing literature investigating climate change and the media” (Doulton and Brown, 2009, p. 191) and the “last decade [...] has seen an expansion of approaches, methods and research questions explored under this umbrella of media and climate change” (Boykoff, 2011, p. 50). Nonetheless, there are still gaps in the literature, which make claims about global media coverage of climate change difficult. This article addresses some of these gaps by providing a comparative study on media attention in countries around the world and over a period of 15 years.

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Analyzing Issue Attention in 27 Countries

### 2.1. Gaps in existing research

Although a number of studies have explored media attention for climate change (see Table 1 for an overview), most of these are single-case studies (see Schäfer et al., 2012). They provide data for certain countries such as Australia (Farbotko, 2005), Canada (Ahchong and Dodds, 2012; Young and Dugas, 2011), Finland (Lyytimäki and Tapio, 2009), Germany (Weingart et al., 2000), India (Jogesh, 2012), Switzerland (Besio and Pronzini, 2010), the UK (Boykoff and Mansfield, 2008; Carvalho and Burgess, 2005), and the United States (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007; Liu et al., 2011). However, as a result of their different analytical perspectives, research questions, analyzed time frames and media, data and methods, their results are difficult to compare. Comparative research, in turn, is missing, even though it has been described as particularly necessary in climate change communication (Anderson, 2009, p. 176f).

Moreover, these studies focus almost exclusively on industrialized countries (exceptions include Jogesh, 2012; Takahashi and Meisner, 2013; Reusswig and Meyer-Ohlendorf, 2012). Even most of the existing comparative studies only include industrialized countries (e.g. Boykoff, 2007; Boykoff and Rajan, 2007; Brossard et al., 2004; Uusi-Rauva and Tienari, 2010) – only very few studies, such as Boykoff and Mansfield (2013), Eide et al. (2010), Schäfer et al. (2011), Shanahan (2009), and Painter and Ashe (2012), include emerging economies like as Brazil and India, or non-industrialized societies such as Namibia.

An additional problem in the few existing comparative studies is the often missing “functional equivalence” of the measurements (Wirth and Kolb, 2012). Some studies compare factors that do not actually correspond with one another, which limit the comparability of their findings. Absolute numbers of newspaper articles on climate change (as used in Eskjaer, 2010), for example, not only indicate different national attention levels to the issue, but are also influenced by the size of a given newspaper and other factors. This is problematic in that newspapers around the world differ measurably in their scope, due to differences in journalistic

culture or financial limitations. This problem also diminishes the informative value of the otherwise pioneering data collection by Boykoff and Mansfield (2013), which includes 50 newspapers from all continents. It is difficult, for example, to determine whether the extent of the reported differences in coverage between Asia and Europe is caused by varying newspaper sizes or by a differing relevance that is assigned to the topic by the respective media.

### 2.2. Research approach and questions

The general value of comparative research is well established. Comparisons are central for assessing how universal certain findings are, and for discovering relationships between social phenomena (Esser and Hanitzsch, 2012). Given that climate change poses a global problem and given that nation states play a crucial role in tackling it, a cross-nationally comparative perspective seems especially valuable for the issue at hand. Still, several different strategies for such a comparison exist. On a general level, a case-oriented and a variable-oriented approach can be distinguished. Case-oriented studies are characterized by a small number of cases which are compared in order to identify the case-specific configuration of factors responsible for the particular shape of the research object. A variable-oriented approach, in contrast, typically includes a larger number of cases and investigates the relationship between descriptive findings and a few explanatory factors across the sample of cases (Wessler and Brüggemann, 2012, p. 29ff). We follow the second approach and present a comparative study that includes 27 countries across the world. While such a large number of countries place a limit on the depth of our analysis, we contend that we can make a valuable contribution to the research field. Firstly, the broad empirical basis enables the generation of evidence for regions and countries which have been (almost) completely neglected so far. Secondly, it allows for systematically investigating factors which have been hypothesized to influence media coverage of climate change. As a complement to existing research – which typically compares only a few countries – we aim at a greater degree of generalization.

We will concentrate here on a relatively simple – but not trivial – measure of climate change media coverage: issue attention. Because the “carrying capacity” (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988, p. 58f) of news media is limited due to finite numbers of newspaper pages or airtime minutes, they can only give attention to a small number of issues at any point in time. Different social problems and the respective actors promoting them compete for this limited space. Media professionals act as gate-keepers and select – on the basis of specific criteria – what they perceive to be newsworthy or appealing to the targeted audience (Koopmans, 2004, p. 373; Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988, p. 61ff). Media attention measures the outcome of this competitive selection process, i.e. the amount of attention given to one issue in relation to the amount of attention given to other issues at the same time. Therefore, this basic quantitative measure is a critical indicator for social problem construction – even though it does not reveal how climate change is framed or what actors are involved in the media debate, it may still have important repercussions on different societal spheres: the amount of space mass media devotes to information and debate about climate change signals the issue’s relevance and will likely affect the problem awareness of the general public, as well as the priority politicians give to it. While these relationships are neither deterministic nor unidirectional (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988, p. 67), empirical studies have found clear signs of such media effects. In particular, varying extents of information on climate change in the media have proven to affect the awareness and knowledge of the general public (Sampei and Aoyagi-Usui, 2009, p. 210; Stamm et al., 2000, p. 230f). Moreover, it has been shown that media attention influences the activities of parliaments and

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