



How do the media affect public perception of climate change and geohazards? An Italian case study

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a combination of a qualitative approach and a quantitative, software-based approach to explore the Italian print media construction of climate change and geohazards between 2007 and 2010. We have broken down our analysis in two sections: the first one deals with the coverage of climate change; the second one focuses on the media representation of hydrogeological hazards and extreme events in Italy. Our software-based, qualitative and quantitative analysis of 1253 storylines from two major Italian broadsheets (the *La Repubblica* and the *Corriere della Sera*) has enabled us to assess the presence of typical journalistic frames such as conflict and dramatization, as well as newly-introduced ones such as “prevention vs damages”, and “weather vs climate”. Our results show that the two newspapers appear to have different “agendas” that might have different impacts on their own readerships: the *La Repubblica* has been on the forefront of forging a broad public consensus on the need for actions aimed at tackling climate change, whereas the *Corriere della Sera* has gradually built a journalistic agenda aimed at minimizing the urgency of the climate change problem.

As regards the media's representation of hydrogeological hazards, we have confirmed what assessed by previous research, i.e. that Italian journalists still prefer to focus on damages rather than prevention; on a better note, the tendency of the Italian press to confuse weather with climate, blaming climate change for extreme rainfalls causing landslides and floods, has decreased in the last four years.

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1. Introduction

As pointed out by Ashlin and Ladle (2007), media coverage of environmental change and natural hazards plays an important role in affecting public perception of these issues (Marston, 2002; Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004; Carvalho and Burgess, 2005; Boykoff, 2007). The media achieve this by introducing frames of reference (Gilliam and Bales, 2001) that influence how different individuals or societies perceive environmental change by channeling information in a way that makes some aspects more relevant than others (Hajer, 1995; Forsyth, 2003).

Climate is by definition an average of weather patterns over a given period of time: hence, the way climate change and its impacts are perceived by the public depends on social processes of knowledge construction. Climate change represents a perfect example of the type of problems that arise in “risk societies”, where risks are often not perceptible and are known mainly through interpretations made by scientists (Beck, 1992).

Many studies have investigated the relationship between climate change and the media. Some have focused on identifying the reasons behind the attention cycles of media coverage of climate change (Trumbo, 1996; McComas and Shanahan, 1999; Brossard et al., 2004). Others have looked into the factors that influence media construction of climate change (McManus, 2000; Dispensa and Brulle, 2003; Boykoff and Rajan, 2007).

As regards geohazards and natural extreme events, these provide an extraordinary research opportunity for examining the news media, the capacity of which to determine the relevance of issues and to set the public's agenda for discussion is huge, and progressively expanding (Singer and Endreny, 1987; Ploughman, 1997). The news media are among the most important sources of geohazards and extreme events information (Fischer, 1994), significantly influencing how society and the government perceive and respond to them.

Research on media reporting of natural catastrophic events and geohazards targets three major areas: 1) How the media report geohazards and disasters; 2) The differences between print and broadcast coverage of the natural extreme events; 3) The ways in which media messages are received and responded to by the audience.

This paper attempts to gain insights into the relationship between climate change and the media and, separately, between geohazards and the media, by using newspapers as the main tool due to the major

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role they play within the overall media discourse, and because of their availability and ease of analysis. Our work is centered on the Italian press, specifically on two quality newspapers, the *La Repubblica* and the *Corriere della Sera*, both with an average daily circulation of about 500,000.

We chose quality newspapers (a) because they are an interesting source of communication on climate change, as they provide more elaborate information than TV news channels (Sparks, 1992), and (b) because we wanted to enhance the comparability of our data with previous content analyses on climate change that focused on this type of newspaper (e.g. Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004; Brossard et al., 2004; Carvalho, 2007).

We analyzed a total of 819 articles dealing with climate change, spanning 46 months, between January 1, 2007 and October 31, 2010; we also analyzed a total of 434 articles dealing with geohazards, spanning the same time frame as above.

2. Case study: Climate change and the Italian print media

We chose 2007 as the starting-year for our analysis since during this 12-month interval (Fig. 1) media coverage of anthropogenic climate change rocketed both in Italy and all over the world as a consequence of some concurring events: the IPCC's 4th Report was published (IPCC, 2007), the Documentary “An inconvenient truth” was awarded an Oscar as Best Documentary; Al Gore and IPCC won the Nobel Peace Prize (ex-aequo); at the end of the year, a highly-controversial UN climate conference was held in Bali, Indonesia.

2.1. Methodology

The databases of Italy's two, most-read national newspapers, i.e. the *La Repubblica* and the *Corriere della Sera*, were first screened for articles mentioning “climate change”, “global warming” and “greenhouse effect” in their entire content (including their title and lead). After removing duplicate articles, the total number of newspaper articles retrieved was 1081 for the *La Repubblica*, and 824 for *Il Corriere della Sera*. Employing methods commonly utilized for media analysis (Antilla, 2005) the articles were then scanned for content, by means of TalTac®, a text-mining software that enables to rapidly analyze large volumes of text. After this preliminary screening, our sample of articles was reduced to 503 for the *La Repubblica*, and to 316 for the *Corriere della Sera*. This selection was performed by deleting storylines that only briefly and incidentally mentioned climate change, for example as a listing of priorities for governments, both nationally and internationally. The resulting two databases, one for each newspaper, contain articles that cover climate change in terms of: a) the science of climate change—causes and foreseen global consequences; b) climate change and international politics and negotiations; c) climate change and biodiversity; d) climate change and human health.

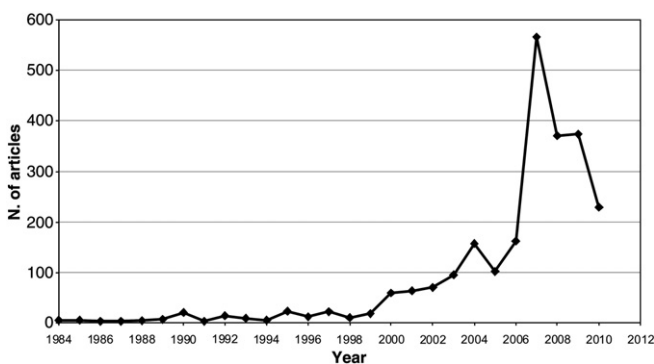


Fig. 1. Number of articles containing the two words “climate change” from 1984 to 2010. Statistics extracted from the database of the *La Repubblica*.

2.2. The conflict frame

Previous research has shown that journalists use general “frames” when constructing the news (Neuman et al., 1992; de Vreese, 1999). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) found that five frames are used in the news media: conflict, (economic) consequences, responsibility, human interest and morality (Neuman et al., 1992; de Vreese, 1999). Here we focus on the *conflict* frame; articles that use this frame highlight conflicts between parties/individuals and emphasize divergences between the opponents (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). With regard to climate change coverage, Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) observed that in the period between 1998 and 2002, the US press, by complying with to the principle of balanced reporting, tended to give equal attention to climate change “catastrophists” (scientists who believe in anthropogenic climate change and think that immediate action should be taken) as to climate change “negationists” (scientists who believe climate change is a natural fluctuation and think that actions should be taken on a voluntary base). Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) show that during that four-year time span, US journalists who reported on climate change chose to emphasize the controversy between the two opposing visions. However, Boykoff (2007), based on his analysis of newspaper coverage of climate change in the US and the UK from 2003 until 2006, found that in the US newspapers the so-called “balance as bias” decreased in comparison to the period 1988–2002. This shift in US reporting took place mainly due to the debate surrounding various extreme meteorological events among which Hurricane Katrina that devastated parts of New Orleans in 2005. A French study that compared the climate change coverage of *Le Monde* and *The New York Times* (Brossard et al., 2004) observed that French newspapers put forth a more limited range of viewpoints on climate change than American ones. In Germany climate change “negationists” get very little attention in the press and journalists focus on scientific certainty (Weingart et al., 2000; von Storch and Krauss, 2005).

Our analysis was aimed at investigating if and how the Italian national press uses the conflict frame when covering climate change. We analyzed our 818 news stories (503 from the *La Repubblica*, and 315 from the *Corriere della Sera*) to determine how many of them explicitly reported the viewpoints of “catastrophists” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change representatives, politicians, scientists and personalities such as Al Gore) and how many of them presented the viewpoints of climate change “negationists”. We identified and counted also the remaining “neutral” articles, that did not report any particular viewpoint, either in favor of “catastrophists” or “negationists”. All of the “neutral” stories deal with international politics and negotiations surrounding climate change. As shown in Fig. 2, we broke down our sample of 503 articles for the *La Repubblica* into “Ideological categories” and years. The results show that, over the course of the

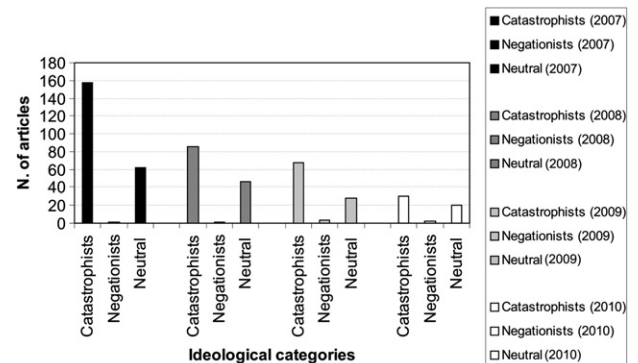


Fig. 2. The conflict frame. Number of articles, ideological categories and years (the *La Repubblica*). See text for explanations.

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