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Coverage and framing of climate change adaptation in the media: A review of influential North American newspapers during 1993–2013



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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of climate change in the news has been a major focus of research over the last decade, reflecting the importance of the media in affecting public opinion and policy. This work has primarily focused on the science of climate change, impacts, and mitigation, yet our understanding on how adaptation is being profiled in the media is limited. In response to this gap, this paper quantitatively examines the coverage and framing of climate change adaptation in four influential North American newspapers between 1993 and 2013. Over the observation period, the total number of articles focusing on adaptation published each year increases, with peaks in reporting in 2007, 2012, and 2013. While adaptation has permeated news coverage, it still remains overshadowed by stories on impacts and mitigation, with increased reporting consistent with increased media attention to climate change over the last two decades. Of the newspaper articles with adaptation content ($n = 271$), the majority (53%) focus primarily on stating the need to adapt, as opposed to documenting actual preparations being undertaken for adaptation or profiling actual adaptations that have taken place. The types of adaptation being reported on are predominantly 'hard' in nature, profiling techno-engineering based responses to reduce potential climate change impacts, in contrast to 'soft' responses that seek to enhance resilience. This representation is particularly evident in reporting in 2012 and 2013. Adaptations being described in the selected newspaper articles are primarily anticipatory in nature up until 2011, after which adaptations are primarily discussed in terms of responding to extreme weather events, specifically in the context of a surge in reporting documented in response to Hurricane Sandy (2012) and flooding in Canada in 2013.

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1. Introduction

The media provides a key arena where the implications of, and response options to, climate change are presented, negotiated, and formulated (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004; Boykoff, 2008; Carvalho, 2010; Rick et al., 2011; Moser, 2014). With the

majority of people obtaining information through newsprint, television, and the Internet, media framing creates awareness of issues linked to climate change, and establishes some responses as possible and others infeasible. Therefore, the media has considerable influence over the public's perception of climate change (Carvalho, 2010; Nerlich et al., 2010; Lyytimaki, 2011; Schmidt et al., 2013). Public perception in

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turn, affects how decision makers view and respond to risks, and while this link is complex and dynamic, media attention has been observed to open-up and direct discursive spaces for policy making in multiple contexts (Soroka, 2002; John, 2006; Walgrave et al., 2008). Dolšák and Houston (2013), for example, demonstrate a link between varying levels of legislative activity on climate change and preceding pro-policy media coverage across States in the US.

How the media portrays climate change therefore matters. Reflecting this, the last decade has witnessed a proliferation of research examining the coverage and framing of climate change in the media, with a strong focus on the science of climate change, impacts, and mitigation (Moser, 2010, 2014; Nerlich et al., 2010; Schmidt et al., 2013). Adaptation has not figured prominently in this work, and where adaptation coverage is examined it is typically as part of a broader review of climate change news coverage, primarily focused on comparing adaptation coverage with respect to mitigation (Liu et al., 2008; Lyytimäki, 2011; Asplund et al., 2013; Takahashi and Meisner, 2013). Exceptions include Moser (2011) who documents the number of adaptation focused articles in the US print media as part of a general examination of adaptation in the public sphere, and Boykoff and Yulsman (2013) who survey Indian news media coverage to examine competing visions of adaptation success. To this end, Moser (2014, p. 6) in her review of studies on adaptation coverage in the media, calls attention to a lack of empirical research, concluding that “what is missing most in adaptation media studies . . . is an in depth examination of contents, framing, and related debates. This constitutes an important research gap.”

This paper is a response to this gap, systematically examining the coverage and framing of adaptation in four influential newspapers in North America. Two main objectives structure the work: (i) To quantitatively review trends in newspaper reporting on adaptation between 1993 and 2013, and (ii) To identify and characterize the framing of adaptation and how this varies over time, focusing on the stages, types, and characteristics of adaptation being reported.

2. Methods

2.1. News media and climate change

Studies on the role of the media in affecting public and policy agendas, have identified two main pathways of influence (Liu et al., 2008). Firstly, through repeated news coverage, media coverage affects the relative salience of a particular topic, creating awareness on a particular issue (Boykoff, 2012). The increase in reporting on climate change issues in general over the last decade, for example, has been linked to increased interest in climate change among the public, in both positive and negative ways (Shehata and Hopmann, 2012). In this study, we examine the salience of adaptation reporting by documenting the annual publication of adaptation focused articles over the last decade, comparing them to general trends in reporting on climate change, and analyze various factors which affect the rise and fall of interest on adaptation in the media.

Secondly, how the media portrays a particular issue influences how the public and policy makers understand and engage with it. Work in this area has used the concept of ‘framing’ to examine the content of news coverage, where framing can be defined as the process by which broad organizing themes are selected and emphasized, elements of a story such as the scenes, their characters and actors are emphasized, and supporting documentation used (Bennett, 2002). Framing thus communicates how and why an issue should be seen as a problem, how it should be handled, and who is responsible for it (Asplund et al., 2013), and is an inherent part of human cognition for organizing and contextualizing events. Goffman for instance, explained how the media provides frames of interpretation by which people locate, perceive, identify, and label events, give meaning to them, organizing experiences and guiding actions. Similarly, Nisbet notes how audiences use frames provided by the media as interpretative short cuts to make sense of policy debates. Herein, framing can involve various conscious and unconscious decisions made by journalists and news producers, reflected in the language used in articles, tone, topic of focus, placement of certain facts and arguments, norms (e.g. balance, objectivity), treatment of uncertainty etc., and have been examined in a well-developed scholarship on the representation of climate change and other scientific issues in the media (Carvalho and Burgess, 2005; Boykoff, 2008; Liu et al., 2008; Nerlich et al., 2010; Boykoff et al., 2013; Boykoff and Yulsman, 2013). In this study, we examine framing by focusing on the stage, type, and characteristics of adaptations being profiled, allowing us to develop preliminary insights on the nature of reporting on adaptation.

2.2. Data collection

A multi-phase review strategy was employed to locate relevant English language articles published between January 1st 1993 and December 31st 2013. Firstly, we searched four influential North American broadsheet newspapers (*Globe & Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*) in the ProQuest database for articles with a substantial focus on climate change adaptation. The selection of these newspapers was based on numerous factors, including: (i) Their national focus, with the aim of study to examine how adaptation is being profiled in newspapers with national readership; (ii) They are considered the most influential newspapers in their respective countries based on circulation, web-metrics, and influence; and (iii) They have a diverse political leaning (Rick et al., 2011; Young and Dugas, 2011; Ahchong and Dodds, 2012; 4imn.com, 2014). The two decade timeframe reflects the findings of other studies which illustrate limited newspaper attention to climate change before this period, and allows us to examine the coverage and framing of adaptation over the history of its emergence in climate policy.

Following the IPCC (2007), ‘adaptation’ was defined as adjustments in human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities, and ‘climate change’ refers to any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or as a result of human activity. A diversity of search terms was employed given the plurality of language

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