

Why local news needs to lead climate change reporting

Ashleigh Hollowell

Syracuse University

ICC 602

Dr. Hedges

September 17, 2022

Thesis

Local news and values-based approaches to covering climate change news will aid in depoliticizing what has largely become an “agenda issue” by resurfacing familiarity and trust in the narrative for readers regardless of political background.

Introduction

The first time I remember hearing about climate change was not because the drought in Colorado — where I grew up — was getting worse or because the winters were becoming harsher. It was in conjunction with politics through Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” which came out in 2006. I was 10 years old, living in a town of 98 people that leaned largely conservative politically and was and still is today a news desert without any direct local news coverage of our region. At that time, I didn’t learn much about what the contents of Gore’s documentary were, rather I learned only about the reaction adults around me had to it — which was confusion at best and anger at worst. For me, climate change was immediately a political topic rather than a scientific one, even just at age 10 — and I wasn’t alone in that experience.

Even today, the topic is highly politicized. In fact, [Reuter’s 2022 Digital News Report](#) (Newman et al., 2022) found that the United States has one of the largest political gaps of any country when it comes to the interest in climate change news. The study found that 55 percent of those who politically identify as Democrats are interested in it, while just 14 percent who identify as Republicans are — a full 41 percentage point gap. On top of that, the Reuter’s report revealed that conservatives say they do view climate change as “a [politicized issue](#) of the ‘Left’” and do not like when outlets take a stand on the issue politically because of this. The report notes that this makes it challenging for newsrooms to figure out how to engage an audience around the facts of the issue. Although climate change is such a hotly contested political issue, the report also shows that only 10 percent of those 35 and older and just 12 percent of those under 35 say they actually seek climate change news from politicians. Where both age groups do get news on climate change is largely from documentaries and major news organizations, with smaller alternative news sources coming in third. Though climate change has become a political topic,

the report shows that individuals of all ages seem to seek information about it away from politicians.

Since this news is not actively being sought out by consumers from politicians, is there a way to depoliticize the topic and bring consensus to the scientific side of it?

Literature review

As the report (Newman et al., 2022) found, there are significant divides when it comes to partisan interest in information about climate change, but is the U.S. public really as divided on the subject as we think — or is the messaging more of what drives polarized narrative?

Research has found that there are key issues in how climate change information is reported that further add fuel to its politicization fire. Not only that, but there are also several systemic issues with the methods by which that information is communicated to the public from documentaries and major news sources alike that continue to add that. Increasing local news coverage of the impacts climate change is having on places people know, and drive by every day, with information from trusted members and scientists in their local communities can help mitigate the politicization and bring science back to the forefront of climate change as a news topic.

To really set the stage and begin to understand the landscape of how to improve news reporting on climate change, we have to first begin with understanding not where we *think* public discourse on the subject — rather what is actually found, which may be different. Research shows that though there is a divide between those who identify as democrats and republicans on their views of climate change, that divide isn't as crystal clear. A Pew Research report (Funk & Hefferon, 2021) found that we may not all be as divided on the subject as polarized news

coverage may make it seem because only 4 percent of Americans in their study of 3,627 U.S. adults reported that they do not believe human activity or natural climate patterns contribute to climate change — highlighting that regardless of party affiliation, a majority (~96 percent) of individuals believe that climate change is happening partly because of human-caused activity and/or natural global patterns. As a public, we may be less divided than it seems on the surface. Further, the same report (Funk & Hefferon, 2021) found that even among Republicans, the group that tends to lean toward less belief in the topic overall, there are still significant differences among them across generational and gender breakdowns. Among Republicans, “... adults in the Millennial generation and Generation Z, ages 18 to 38 in 2019 – 52 percent think the government is doing too little on climate.” Additionally, Funk and Hefferon’s report found that 46 percent of women in the Republican Party think the government needs to do more in regard to climate change action.

How people view climate change seems to also correspond to where they live (Funk & Hefferon, 2021). Sixty-two percent of Americans report that they have seen climate change impacting their local communities to at least some extent or greater (Funk & Hefferon, 2021). Expanding on that, the same report from Pew Research by Funk and Hefferon found that, “The degree to which Americans report experiencing effects of climate change in their local community varies by geographic region. Americans in Pacific states (which include California, Washington, Oregon, Hawaii and Alaska) are most likely to see at least some local impacts of climate change (72%). By comparison, 54% of those living in Mountain states (Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming) say climate change is affecting their local area at least some.”

If views are not as starkly divided as they may seem, then why are there such difficulties in climate change news reporting with the public? Experts have found several reasons for this, including some major issues with the way reporting and messaging of climate change are conducted across the board. What's more? The issues with how news coverage of climate change is conducted are not new. In fact, an older report from 2007 which examined an enormous set of news clips and stories from different outlets between the years 1996 and 2004 found that, "United States television news coverage has perpetrated an informational bias by significantly diverging from the consensus view in climate science that humans contribute to climate change. Troubles in translating this consensus in climate science have led to the appearance of amplified uncertainty and debate, also then permeating public and policy discourse," (Boykoff, 2007).

That was fifteen years ago, and several new studies since not only illustrate that not much has changed in climate change news coverage and communication since — but also that a range of factors including the language used to communicate and describe climate change, emotionally charged messaging, misinformation and even the way factual reporting can go south quickly — all hampers climate change news coverage from being received as effectively as it otherwise could be.

Jes Thompson, an associate professor at Northern Michigan University, who specializes in environmental communication gave a TEDx talk not long ago highlighting research she conducted in this vein which found that there are several major issues in how messaging about climate change is communicated to the public. Fear and doomsday appeals, such as referring to climate change events as "catastrophic" or "irreversible" — even if that may scientifically be the case — does not work (Thompson, 2018). Similarly, references that are too global, like penguins or polar bears losing their homes due to melting ice caps, don't hit home for recipients of these

messages. Thompson notes that individuals who hear the doomsday messaging or see the images or videos of climate change effects far away — even if they care in the moment — they are too far from the problem, and it is easy to wake up the next morning to a beautiful day in their local community and forget all about it (Thompson, 2018).

Further, she notes that because, “the language of science is not the language ... of the public,” often words used in climate change reporting and messaging have a very specific meaning for climate scientists and an entirely separate meaning for the general population. For instance, though it takes a vast amount of supporting evidence in the scientific community for a collective group of experts to say something is “likely” to happen, in our day-to-day linguistics, “likely” means it really may never happen. Or a scientific “theory” with in-depth supporting evidence to the general public, a “theory” may just mean a “guess,” and “experimentation manipulation” is to the public possibly perceived as “tampering” or “fixing” the data (Thompson, 2018). There can be such huge defining discrepancies in the messaging, yet journalists and climate change communications still often use these terms, even though they’re likely adding to the confusion around what is already such a global, multifaceted, complex topic.

As with most things, emotions also play a role in how climate change messaging is received. Just as noted above how fear and catastrophic terminology don’t work, further research supports this case as well. Specifically in regard to media and news messaging around climate change, “episodically framed messages significantly decrease news believability,” (Jin & Atkinson, 2021). However, the same research, which examined emotional relationship to climate change news on an international, national, and local scale also found that if media content is not positive, like climate change often is not, reporting on the topic at a local scale with fact-based information is found to more effectively resonate with audiences when paired

messages with longer, and deeper narratives that are ‘close to home’ and emotional (Jin & Atkinson, 2021). When emotional narratives that are fact-based hit ‘close to home’ but also show the bigger picture and are “locally based, such initiatives also connect with global discourses like climate justice ...” then activism is sparked and “is likely to matter to citizens’ subjectivities and imaginaries of social structures, roles and options for collective action” (Carvalho et al., 2016).

Not to be ignored, misinformation and disinformation across the news media landscape has also brought a substantial hurdle to how climate change news is received and understood by the masses. It’s important to point out the above failures to communicate climate change information play a role in this as well.

In Thompson’s TEDx talk, she points out that, “The whole beauty of science is not about proving things is certain, but discovering more uncertainty. So as they start to communicate their results, with predictions that have lots of nuances or ambiguous scenarios of how things might play out, it leaves the audience just more confused,” (Thompson, 2018). Additionally, she importantly notes that the way ‘balanced’ journalism is viewed by the public makes this even more difficult — because the science is continuously evolving, the narrative is continuously shifting, and fact-based reporting can cause individuals to become confused and uncertain what to trust.

Further fueling the fire when it comes to climate change, “Over 97 percent of actively publishing climate scientists agree that humans has been altering the Earth's climate for close to a century as well. But when you look at the news stories, 28 percent reflect that scientific consensus, leaving the audience to believe that the issue is way more controversial than it actually is,” (Thompson, 2018).

That analysis is not unique to Thompson’s findings alone. In fact, the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) have battled these challenges for decades in conjunction with misinformation. When fact-based reporting becomes confusing and its surrounding linguistics can be problematic, this builds a wall that journalists have described as hard to overcome.

“Environmental journalists today work in a world where climate denial, disinformation and trash talk are commonplace... The problems of journalism are changing, and the big question is not just how we adapt to them, but whether we can deal with them at all. Journalism is about facts and facts are in danger of becoming completely obsolete,” a journalist associated with the SEJ recently wrote about their experience in an editorial piece (Davis, 2022). He went on to say, “... climate denial and disinformation are very real and very prevalent in the mediasphere,” and that a major issue in the field continues to be the ways in which “climate denialists and others exploit journalists’ impulse and effort to be fair — using their own values against them. The result is ‘both-sides-ism.’ In extreme form, it tries to demand that falsehood be given equal time, and equal weight, as truth,” (Davis, 2022).

Analysis and observations

Overall, though public opinion and views on climate change may not be as black and white along partisan lines as we may believe because of media — the major issues seem to be rooted in the way reporting is done and the messaging around the topic. Shifting back to partisan lines and the politicization of the issue — though we may not be as divided as a public on the science of climate change as many believe — it is also important to examine research on what does change minds about climate science. Because the issue tends to lie in the way news reporting and messaging about climate change has been conducted for decades as detailed above

— despite the concrete science, there are still those who don't want to change their minds and have been pushed the opposite direction, perhaps out of the confusing rhetoric and conflicting facts as science unfolds, or the fearfully-charged messaging altogether. Because of this, even if environmental journalism and climate change messaging is overhauled overnight it won't fix everything, it is important to note what has shifted the opinions of those who have been pushed hard in another direction.

What the research around this reveals is that values-based messaging and localization of climate change can and sometimes does pull opinions back to a centered ground and out from the corners of denial or fear. Specifically, one study found that among those who report being in denial or opposition of climate change, “conservative politicization of climate change has occurred largely because of fears that climate mitigation policies would hamper free market commerce due to greater government oversight and regulations,” (Dixon et al., 2017).

Additional research supports these findings. A conference hosted by Columbia University's business school and center for climate and life found sometimes changing minds really comes down to the impact that can be felt in local zip codes and wallets. For example, “when sea level rise will likely affect a particular zip code, and if someone in the financial sector acts on that knowledge by pulling investments out of real estate in that area, it sets in motion a cascade of effects as others wonder why,” the article notes (Cho, 2017). Further, that “... if you just make it plain that there is a social cost of carbon, and it is going to impact your investments and your retirement account or the value of your home, it gets people's attention. The recognition that policies to deal with climate change are needed will naturally follow,” (Cho, 2017).

Additional research shows that along partisan lines, and specifically for those who identify as Republicans, “The content of small local newspapers ... matters more than you might

think. National news outlets like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* have seen increased mentions of climate change and global warming in their pages, but it is local news that is seen as most trustworthy, particularly among Republicans,” (Carter, 2020).

Discussion

Repeatedly throughout this research, the terms “local,” “locally,” and “community” continuously resurfaced across the sources — even when the title of the research had nothing to do with the terminology. Thus, it’s clear that a needed focus toward localizing journalistic reporting of climate change is somewhere value should be placed. Regardless of political opinions or associations — and as the research points out, these are not as starkly different as they may seem anyway — local news, local examples, local stories, local facts, and easy-to-understand messaging and language about that news, examples, stories and facts can be key to depoliticizing climate change in news media across the board.

To further illustrate the impact that local news can have in this way, multiple studies have found that the potential local news has to bring individuals together on the scientific issue of climate change is immense — yet seems to be untapped. National news continues to lead in the volume and quantity of climate change news stories, but when local news does touch on the topic, “Climate change communication research suggests that making issues local and focusing on what people can gain by taking action create much stronger narratives,” (Carter, 2020).

It’s equally important to note that, while local news can more effectively garner public trust and build non-partisan acceptance toward issues like climate change (Carter, 2020) — exclusively reporting on climate change at a local level is not the “end-all, be-all.” In fact, it has

also been found that “When the reporting exclusively focuses on the local consequences of climate change, and omits the relationship between those consequences and their global causes,” (Olausson, 2013).

Recommendations and Conclusions

There are 613,000,000 results on Google when the phrase “proof climate change is not real,” is searched. There will continue to be skepticism, denial, and misinformation about it, but I think that is not the place to focus. Rather, based on the extensive findings referenced above, I believe the more important focus is for journalists to collectively understand the ways in which their reporting topics, language and messaging can further divide consensus on climate change. Even when well-intentioned, well-researched and factual reporting is done — only when it is done in a way that does not elicit fear or doom; that takes scientific terms and adequately explains them with verbiage that resonates with the day-to-day person’s understanding of that verbiage; that shows examples of impact not far away, but in backyards of communities with local experts and sources that are trusted; and connects that narrative back to both how it will impact things in a person’s local zip-code, wallet and what that all means also at a global scale — only then will climate change reporting stand a chance at combating misinformation and bridging the politicized gap of climate change information in the public sphere.

Of course, funding local news continues to be a challenge nationally. Now that, the pressing need and potential for local news to change the narrative on climate change has been illustrated by countless schools of thought and tireless research efforts. Further research should be done, as should action be taken — on ways to incentivize local news to do in-depth reporting on the impacts of climate change, while also providing necessary training and resources to

accomplish this, and continue to regularly have these stories in the news cycle across the local level.

References

- Boykoff, M. T. (2007). Lost in translation? United States television news coverage of Anthropogenic climate change, 1995–2004. *Climatic Change*, 86(1-2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-007-9299-3>
- Carter, K. (2020, December 30). *How local media affects climate change understanding*. National Center for Science Education. Retrieved September 17, 2022, from <https://ncse.ngo/how-local-media-affects-climate-change-understanding>
- Carvalho, A., van Wessel, M., & Maesele, P. (2016). Communication practices and political engagement with climate change: A research agenda. *Environmental Communication*, 11(1), 122–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2016.1241815>
- Cho, R. (2017, October 20). *What changes minds about climate change?* State of the Planet. Retrieved September 17, 2022, from <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2017/08/09/what-changes-minds-about-climate-change/>
- Davis, J. A. (2022, August 24). Climate ‘Censorship’ Raised in Disinformation Fracas. *Society of Environmental Journalists*. Society of Environmental Journalists. Retrieved September 17, 2022, from <https://www.sej.org/publications/watchdog/climate-censorship-raised-disinformation-fracas>.
- Dixon, G., Hmielowski, J., & Ma, Y. (2017). Improving climate change acceptance among U.S. conservatives through value-based message targeting. *Science Communication*, 39(4), 520–534. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547017715473>

- Funk, C., & Hefferon, M. (2021, July 12). *U.S. public views on climate and Energy*. Pew Research Center Science & Society. Retrieved September 17, 2022, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2019/11/25/u-s-public-views-on-climate-and-energy/>
- Jin, E., & Atkinson, L. (2021). The moderating role of emotion: The combinatory effects of positive emotion and news framing techniques on climate change attitudes. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 98(3), 749–768. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699020988105>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Eddy, K., & Kleis Nielsen, R. (2022, June). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022. Retrieved September 17, 2022, from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf
- Olausson, U. (2013). The diversified nature of “domesticated” news discourse. *Journalism Studies*, 15(6), 711–725. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2013.837253>
- Thompson, J. (2018). *Let's Change The Way We Talk About Climate Change*. TED. TEDx NMU. Retrieved September 17, 2022, from https://www.ted.com/talks/jes_thompson_let_s_change_the_way_we_talk_about_climate_change.