

The IPCC news circuit

Climate change reports have been increasingly covered by the media but what drives the news stories and what is their power?

Over the last decade or so, the volume of research on media reporting of climate change science has grown significantly. This is understandable, as climate change has made the news for quite some time and through different narratives — impacts of rising temperatures, sea-level rise, flooding and drought events, to give some examples. Understanding the role of those narratives in the climate science communication space is important to better target initiatives to increase public engagement with climate change. And as our scientific understanding of the climate system advances, and countries' efforts to agree on new sets of emission targets build up, the media discourse about climate change evolves and so do the views and awareness of the public. Of course this is not a linear and painless process; climate science communication has been at times tense and problematic, as exemplified by the news media coverage of the climate change slowdown in 2013, and its consequences on the public debate about climate change (M. Boykoff, *Nature Clim. Change* 4, 156–158; 2014).

But how much do we really know about the news chain (from production to consumption) in the context of climate change? More specifically, what is the role of the media when it comes to reporting climate science? And what can the scientific community do, if anything, to ensure a transparent, accurate and effective media representation of their research? These are very sensible questions to ask at a time of reflection for the IPCC, the leading international body for the assessment of climate change science. At its 41st session in Nairobi, Kenya, in February this year, the IPCC discussed the future of its work and its communication activities. It announced an ambitious programme of outreach in 2015 to ensure the findings of the Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) remain prominent in the run-up to the next Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, COP21, to be held in Paris in December this year (<http://bit.ly/187pymS>). Interestingly, Norway proposed to hold a two-day expert meeting of IPCC representatives over the summer this year, to share (and learn from) their AR5 communication experiences (<http://bit.ly/1EPH2mh>) and move the communication strategy forward. Hopefully, the collection of articles in our Focus 'IPCC



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and media coverage of climate reports' this month will contribute new insights and help the reflection process.

News media, and certainly news about climate science, is meant to inform readers, at least in a free world. But the media always do so in a specific social, political and cultural context; therefore what drives news stories, their content, and the power they may exercise on the audience change with the context. Media studies have largely focused on the content of news stories and, to some extent, they have analysed the news impact on audiences. Yet, content analysis has mainly looked at newspaper text. In an Article at page 380, Saffron O'Neill and colleagues show how the IPCC AR5 was represented in UK and US broadcast and print coverage, and on Twitter worldwide. They identified a rich set of 'frames' in the news about all three Working Group reports to AR5 and found that not all WG reports were equally newsworthy. The sequential three-part structure of AR5 may have generated news fatigue by the time the WGIII report was released to the public. Lack of effective narratives and visuals around the WGIII report also explains the lower media coverage. Also, the technical language of the Summary for Policymakers (SPM) to each WG report is noted as another potential barrier to news reporting. In a Commentary on page 282, Richard Black tells us the extent to which

the SPM documents are impenetrable to a non-expert audience and how easily they could be turned into meaningful sources of information to policymakers and the general public. Yes, one could argue that the IPCC mandate is not to communicate the science, and rightly so. The IPCC is about assessing the science. But the IPCC did develop a Communications Strategy in 2012 (<http://bit.ly/1KWzL2>). Therefore, hearing from news media experts should help to improve such strategy going forward. In another Commentary on page 284, Leo Hickman calls for the SPM plenaries to be opened to media organizations for example, and to produce shorter and targeted reports. In a third Commentary on page 286, James Painter talks about the gap between the extensive use of the risk language in the IPCC communication of AR5, particularly of the WGII report, and the poor news media coverage of climate change as a risk issue. But still, these contributions have not gone much beyond the content of news stories and what makes it accurate and effective. We need more research on the effects of news stories about IPCC reports on audiences. And we need to complete the news circuit, by looking at what forces and pressures operate in the newsroom, a call that Julia Corbett makes to the media and communication research community in her Commentary on page 288. Let's hope many will listen. □