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Climate change in the news: a study of the British press *

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Abstract

The paper builds on an extensive study of the coverage of climate change by the British press from the mid-eighties until 1997. A *corpus* of over 2 000 articles published in the *Guardian*, *Times* and *Independent* is the basis for both a quantitative and qualitative analysis on the representation of this complex matter.

Climate change is a contested issue at the scientific, political, economic and social levels. The media are a central arena for such a debate. As a marketplace of arguments, the media promote some ideas and voices while suppressing others. It is then urgent to identify potential structural biases, as well as challenges to the dominant positions.

The mass means of communication have an important role in the social production, reproduction and change of views and values. In other words, the media matter for the discursive construction of a normative order about the global environment.

The aims of the paper will be to provide an overview of the coverage of climate change by the British press and to critically examine some aspects of the representation of the issue. The paper will be structured in two parts. Firstly, I will present the fluctuation in the number of articles published in the press throughout a period of almost 15 years and discuss possible explanations of peaks and lows, as well as their impact.

In the second part, I will investigate the ways the media represents the claims and views of different social actors - policy-makers, NGOs, business, scientists, etc. A sample of press articles will be analysed in detail to assess this point. Such an analysis will shed light on the political role of the media and help us know the extent to which the media tend to legitimate certain ideological positions or to promote a valuable critique of various alternatives.

Another goal of the paper will be to examine the representation of ethical viewpoints in the press. Some of the themes to be explored are equity, justice and responsibility. The latter can be considered in relation to peoples geographically or culturally distant and in relation to future generations.

The methodology used in the second part of the paper draws on various strands of discourse analysis.

Keywords: media; climate change; United Kingdom

Climate change in the news: a study of the British press¹

Introduction

The media are an important marketplace for claims and arguments to be interplayed. Not only do the media amplify or suppress the viewpoints of different social agents on specific issues, as they themselves are moved by a certain ideology and institutional culture, and aim at advancing certain agendas. The representation of reality in the media is therefore by no means 'natural' or 'inevitable', but the product of a set of choices and discursive operations.

Climate change is one of the most serious challenges for humankind in the next few decades. However, the complexity and the multiple dimensions involved in the problem render it open to interpretation: economically, ethically and politically the issue is subjected to a myriad of constructions. How are divergent discourses on climate change depicted in the media?

This paper proposes focusing on the representation of climate change in the quality press of the United Kingdom. It will aim at examining the participation of various social actors, especially environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in the public construction of this issue, and how the press portrayed various types of claims. The paper will also contribute to understanding the processes of contestation and coalescence of views. The period covered by this study comprises the constitution of climate change as a media issue in the late eighties through the end of 1997, the time of the Kyoto Protocol, a major political landmark.

The paper starts with a quantitative overview of the press coverage of climate change. The second part will consist of a discourse analysis of a sample of articles from the Guardian, the Independent and the Times.

1. Reporting climate change from 1985 to 1997

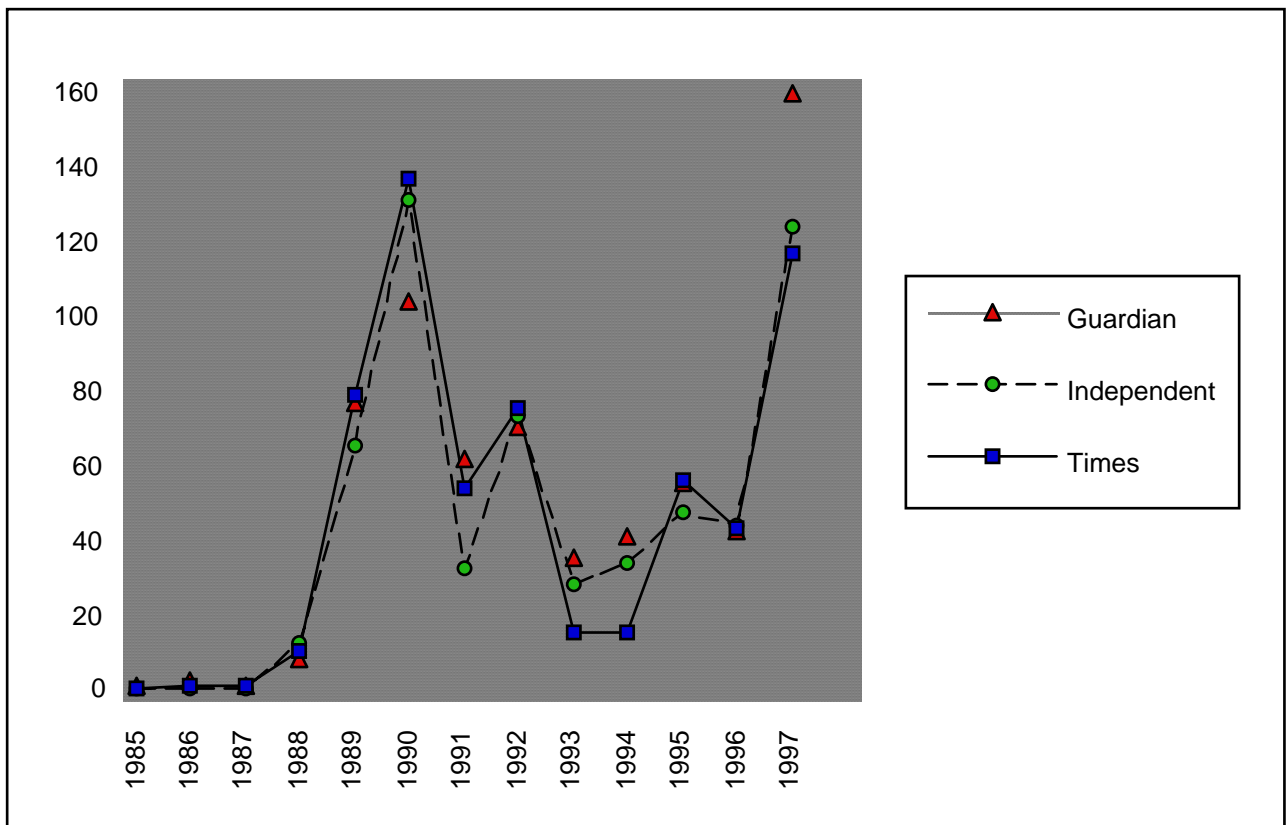
Numbers of articles are a significant indicator of the weight given by the press to an issue. As shown in the graph below, climate change was almost inexistent in the British press until 1988. This year sees an average of ten articles per paper on the topic. The largest

¹ This paper draws partly on a paper entitled 'Environmental organizations and the discursive construction of climate change. Re-reading activism in the British press' that I presented at the 41st convention of the International Studies Association, Los Angeles, 15-18 March 2000

increase in the number of articles in thirteen years takes place between 1988 and 1989 - between a factor of five and ten.

The rising trend continues into 1990 which is the year with the highest number of articles on climate change for the Independent and the Times (second highest for the Guardian). The rapid ascension of climate change in the press in 1989 and 1990 is a very important phenomenon. What led to such a sudden rise of climate change in the media agenda? In his analysis of the coverage of the greenhouse effect in the American press, Mazur (1998) points to several factors that may have been behind a similar trend over there: ozone carrying along 'its sister issue', as it surged upward in the news in the late eighties, environmental groups calling attention to the issue, political mobilisation around it, the drought and high temperatures of 1988 in the USA, and the 1988 testimony of NASA scientist James Hansen about global warming. It will be interesting to examine the British case and inquire into the socio-political context that gave rise to climate change as a public issue.

The following chart clearly illustrates the dramatic fluctuation of articles published over thirteen years.



In 1991 there is a serious drop in the number of articles. The most striking one is in the Independent, down to a fourth of the number of 1990. 1992 sees a small growth of coverage (quite considerable in the case of the Independent), possibly stimulated by the Earth conference in Rio de Janeiro. This trend is sharply inverted in the following years, most notoriously in the Times.

Possible explanations for the decline of the press coverage of climate change that started in 1991 and continued through 1994 may be found in the loss of novelty of this sort of issue and subsequent decrease in news worthiness, and in the absence of major news stories on the global environment after 1992, amongst other factors (Mazur, 1998).

In 1995 there is a new expansion in the coverage of climate change, which decreases slightly in 1996 and then augments enormously in 1997. The Kyoto protocol, agreed in December of 1997, and all the expectation that surrounded it largely explain the numbers of 1997.

Possibly the most interesting aspect is the fact that in terms of quantity of coverage the three newspapers follow very similar trends, sometimes so identical that they only diverge by one article. Are the contents of the coverage, i.e. the representations of the problem of climate change, equally similar?

2. Representing claims and ideological stances

In this part, I will aim at examining and discussing press representations of the discourses on climate change promoted by different social actors. More specifically, the study takes all the articles that refer to or cite environmental NGOs in order to analyse the ways in which their claims, and others', are conveyed.

I will focus on three periods: 1985-July 1989², 1993, and November-December 1997. The first and the last periods may be considered 'critical discourse moments' in the construction of climate change. 1993 is the lowest point in press coverage of climate change. Because addressing the issue requires continued attention, it will be pertinent to assess how the press depicts the issue in a such a phase.

² The publication of press articles hits the first 'top' in July 1989 in some newspapers.

2.1. 1985-1989 -the public career of climate change starts off

The silence of the British press in relation to climate change before the autumn of 1988 is rendered critical when we compare with the American press, where this issue was already quite high on the agenda in 1987 (Mazur, 1998). Important events in the socio-political construction of climate change went unheard in the United Kingdom. Climate change was not important enough to be on the news until there was a Governmental expression of interest on the issue.

The turning point was a speech by Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister of a Conservative government, at the Royal Society in September 1988. In a sudden inflection to her so far anti-environmental stances, Thatcher declares that : ‘It is possible that... we have unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of the planet itself.’ Ozone and global warming become the banners of this new environmental crusade.

As environmentalism becomes official the press is to follow. The number of articles on climate change starts to rise.³ Various institutions and organisations are now given voice to describe the new dangers. The respected Met Office, for instance, issued forecasts of global-scale floods soon after Thatcher’s speech.

From very early the public career of climate change was marked by various appropriations of the issue by different social actors. The most remarkable of such developments was how climate change became the centrepiece of the governmental and business discourse on nuclear power. Climate change was seen as an opportunity for promoting the growth of nuclear energy. In late 1988 and 1989, several governmental pronouncements on the matter can be found in the press, in parallel to an intense media campaign led by British Nuclear Fuels. The appropriation of the greenhouse cause by the Government and by a powerful business lobby ended up serving the amplification of the problem, although this was not the first aim of either of them. An interesting side-effect, nevertheless, in the social construction of the issue.

From the side of the government, global warming may have been used as a tool to shift attention from local and national environmental problems into ‘global’ ones. As suggested by Roe (1994), the ‘global’ discourse actually justifies and excuses inaction at the national and local levels.

³ A sign of change was, for example, the fact that the Independent run a special report on climate change on 17.10.88, with four articles on the subject, including one on the first page.

Another example of ‘ecologisation’ of business discourse (cf. Eder, 1996) is provided by the energy efficiency industry, represented by the Association for the Conservation of Energy (ACE). ACE worked as a catalyst for much of the press coverage of the cuts in research funding done by the government, several with relevance for the greenhouse problem.

How are the claims of environmental pressure groups represented in the middle of all these ‘sponsors’ of the greenhouse issue? From very early, environmental NGOs put a significant emphasis on policy solutions, and on the economic meaning of climate change. In conformity with the hegemonic paradigm of commitment to growth, there is no ‘limits to growth’⁴ talk coming from NGOs, no economically pessimistic positions. This economically ‘sensible’ attitude of environmental organisations is combined with political pragmatism. In fact, in the British quality press, environmental NGOs are in 1988-89 strongly connected to a discourse of administrative rationalism. As it is portrayed in the newspapers, the focus of NGO intervention on the issue of climate change seems to be on pressure on the government for adoption of legislation, financial commitment, and other political forms of approaching the issue. Another important discourse promoted by environmental organisations is what I would call techno-scientific rationalism. This is a set of propositions and concepts that rests fundamentally upon technological fixes for (technological) problems.

We may imagine that NGOs decided to frame climate change in these terms because they were aware of the severe selection processes that take place in news production, and opted to argue in the same terms as the other voices heard by the media to avoid the possibility of total exclusion of a daringly different discourse...

A highly significant trait of the representation in the press of environmental NGOs and their claims on the greenhouse effect is the diversity of alliances that they engage in. From business institutions, like the Association for the Conservation of Energy, to science and to opposition parties (mainly Labour and Green parties), NGOs were capable of engaging in multiple discourse coalitions and being the most versatile actor in the press.

From the beginning of the press coverage of climate change, each of the three newspapers covered by this study, through their implicit or explicit support of different social agents, essentially advanced a different ideological viewpoint into what the problem means. From very early, the Guardian shows concern with the environment, repeatedly

⁴ For an analysis of this and other environmental discourses, see Drysek, 1997.

calling for more and better action from the government. In 1988-89, the Times awards global warming a high degree of attention. Nevertheless, this is by far the paper which makes the least references to NGOs. More importantly, the Times quite subtly dismisses the arguments of NGOs and supports the status quo. Often, ideology in the Times can be deduced more from ‘absences’, such as absence of criticism or controversy, than from ‘presences’. The Independent has a divided discourse. Contestation of the government is very common, but it is done from different ideological viewpoints, either a liberal one or sometimes close to the stances of environmental organisations.

Graef (2000) has suggested that newspapers keep promoting different versions of reality, thereby reinforcing the world views of their readers. This is a useful image. Given the significant differences between the three newspapers found by this study, it is worth pursuing a separate analysis in the next two sub-sections.

2.2. 1993 – climate change loses momentum in politics and in the media

Despite the very sparse press coverage, new meanings are attached to climate change in this period, and environmental organisations appear in new discourse coalitions. The proportion of articles with a moderate or predominant NGO framing is slightly higher than before.

Guardian

In early 1993, the Guardian ‘helps’ Greenpeace address the insurance industry with a study that warns this business of eminent financial ruin due to climate change (GDN-03.02.93)⁵. In this interpellation (cf. Hajer, 1995), Greenpeace is playing yet another card in the economic game and reaching yet another partner. The press coverage of this study has another consequence in that it keeps the risks involved in climate change on the agenda. This new discursive construction of climate change by Greenpeace was therefore a highly valuable strategy.

In a striking new development, major economic powers appear allied to environmentalists in May 1993. ‘Industry joins greens to ambush minister on pollution’

⁵ Articles will be identified by the name of the paper (GDN-Guardian; IND-Independent; TMS-Times) and date of publication.

(GDN-08.05.93). We are told that Michael Howard, the Environment Secretary, ‘had expected that industrialists chosen from companies such as BP, ICI, Shell, PowerGen and British Gas would welcome his refusal to adopt tougher regulations’ to greenhouse gas emissions. Instead, in a joint report with academics and environmentalists, business calls for measures such as rises in fuel taxes and cuts in car company parks, and denies the capacity of the market alone to address the problem of climate change. This is one of the most interesting and significant coalescences of discourses on climate change throughout a decade.

As in the eighties, a critique of the government, still Conservative, is prevalent in 1993 in the Guardian (it is present in five out of seven articles).

Times

No NGO critique of the government or oppositional discourse find room in the Times. In fact, not a single article constitutes the NGOs as judges of the government. Instead, the three articles in which they are quoted are either a-political or neutral towards the government.

The losses for the insurance industry, with the news peg of severe storms in the USA in March 1993, are the central theme of two of the Times articles. They are dominated by financial reasoning. Remarkably, the insurance business is now aiding in the construction of climate change risk.

Despite its limits and biases, the Times coverage is important in the advancement of the climate change issue because it integrates the issue in the analysis of economic and financial matters, contributing for an institutionalisation of climate change - both at the level of press coverage and at the level of actual economic practices. In one of the Times articles (30.10.93), there is a ‘normalisation’ and ‘routinisation’ of the necessity of energy efficiency at the domestic level, therefore helping raise awareness to one of the main sources of greenhouse emissions.

Independent

Like the Times, the Independent offers very little coverage of NGO activism in 1993 (the least proportional amount of the three papers). Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth appear in association with ACE in two articles (IND-23.03.93; 16.10.93). The first article

directs an ambivalent critique to the government - on the one hand, it opposes the fuel tax rise done under the environmental banner; on the other hand, Greenpeace is brought into view saying that the cuts in greenhouse gas emissions aimed by the government are extremely far from what is necessary.

Based on the analysis of press articles in 1993, we can conclude that the differences between the three newspapers in representing the claims and views of environmental pressure groups are a clear indicator of the powerful gate-keeping role of each of these news making institutions. The participation of NGOs in the public construction of climate change is importantly controlled by them.

2.3. Kyoto, 1997 - the full return of climate change

By the end of 1997, the changed perception of the economics of climate change mentioned before is adopted by the government, now with a discourse that is much closer to the NGOs. Internationally, the UK develops a real effort to influence other countries in combating the greenhouse effect. Internally, though, the rhetoric does not equal the actual policies.

Independent

The most distinctive, and most surprising, feature of the representation of environmental activism in the Independent at the end of 1997, concerns the construction of risk. Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace reports are cited (IND-04.11.97; 13.11.97), presenting evidence that the problem is real and could intensify quite severely. At a period when political leadership, in Britain and throughout the world, was geared towards preparing the negotiation of limits to greenhouse gas emissions (to take place in Kyoto at the first week of December), environmental pressure groups are given by this newspaper the role of showing the public what are the risks and dangers at stake. Never before had environmentalists been given such a participation in the coverage of risk.

An analysis of the campaigns of Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace shows that throughout the 1990's they produced many documents that contained equally dramatic scenarios of climate impacts. Yet, they went unheard. The main difference is that now all

the established authority apparatus is telling journalists the same as NGOs. Now, science and government are saying of the dangers involved. The Met Office and 'leading' British experts advance an image as apocalyptic as the NGOs' (IND-28.11.97).

The British government and John Prescott are highly applauded before and mostly after Kyoto for the 'brave new world' (12.12.97) they helped to create. The only dissonant note in this glorification of British politics is an article on 18.12.97, where environmental NGOs express their 'anger over environmental cuts' - just after the Kyoto conference the British government decides to cut the funding of the Energy Saving Trust, an important institution in the search for energy efficiency.

Times

The Times has a remarkably low number of articles with references to NGOs in this period - a mere three. One article (04.12.97) is centred on the information released by WWF and Birdlife International about impacts of climate change on various animal species and the other one (11.12.97) is a very positive assessment of Kyoto, about which, however, environmental groups are said to be 'dismayed'.

If it were not for the article published on 30.11.97, and the absence of more references to NGOs, the ideological positions of the Times vis-à-vis environmental organisations and their claims would have to be more guessed than expressly read. But the November article - 'Calm down, it isn't the end of the world' - leaves no ambiguity: NGOs are wrong! 'Environmentalists' are designated as 'visionary hobbits' who see in global warming the doom of our age, who 'avoid economic "progress" like the plague', and want to deny the 'third world' the possibility of developing, with a 'new age imperialism'. This type of ridicule and cynicism are part of a reactionary discourse that is, in many fashions, pervasive in the Times.

Guardian

The Guardian's coverage of climate change in November and December 1997 continued this newspaper's sympathy to the arguments and views of NGOs. This is immediately expressed by the number of articles with references to environmental pressure groups: 13 .

The most significant aspect of the Guardian's coverage is the frequent presence of an ecological modernisation discourse. Environmental protection, and specifically for climate change, a shift from fossil fuels to renewable energies, is now repeatedly articulated and made compatible with economic vitality, especially job generation. This discourse is sometimes brought in by the NGOs (GDN-21.11.97; 27.11.97; 06.12.97). But it is also promoted by other actors, such as governmental think tanks.

In 1997, the Guardian has mixed outlooks into governmental policies. There is praise, on the one hand, for the role of the United Kingdom in the international politics of climate change. On the other hand, the Guardian sees the big test internally. And here the picture is not very positive. Except for some institutionalisation of the environmental discourse through the creation of the Commons Environmental Audit Select Committee, the Guardian tends to find faults and contradictions in the government's practices (GDN-19.11.97; 20.11.97; 26.11.97). Amongst others, the Chancellor's policies and the state budget indicate that 'saving the planet must wait' (GDN-26.11.97).

3. Conclusions

Throughout a decade, discourses on climate change have undergone several transformations. Both the science and, most distinctly, the politics of climate change remained open to contestation, but important coalescences also took place. Environmental NGOs often led an oppositional discourse, towards both the government and industry. However, possibly realising that mere contestation would weaken their positions, NGOs also took up 'cooperative' relations finding partners in business, science and politics, with a focus on the promotion of solutions.

This study has shown that there has been in the UK an important discursive structuration of climate change by the government. Discursive structuration (Hajer, 1995) takes place when actors are compelled to use the terms of a certain discourse in a certain domain. Most press articles on climate change are initiated in the sphere of government, and other social actors appear predominantly in a reactive role, such as the one of commentators. This is very visible in the matter of nuclear power in the eighties or in the sense of urgency created around the Kyoto conference.

Finally, this paper has clearly indicated that there are crucial idiosyncrasies and variations between the three newspapers under examination. In their coverage of climate

change, the Guardian, the Independent and the Times in fact promote different versions of reality.

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