Carbonundrums: Making sense of climate change reporting around the world

Workshop Summary. 27 June 2007

Osler-McGovern Centre, Green College
Oxford University

Reported by:
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Seminar background

The Reuters Foundation hosted a half-day seminar-workshop organised by the ECI and the Reuters Institute, to analyse and discuss the issue of climate change reporting around the world. The seminar focused on the changing trends in reporting issues relating to climate change, how and why climate change stories are covered, and the practical and theoretical obstacles to getting accurate stories printed or broadcast. The seminar concluded with a breakout session on identifying practical ways of improving the quality and quantity of global coverage. There were 44 participants from academia, NGOs, and various media organisations.

Core Organising Team

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Session 1: Climate change reporting around the world

Andy Revkin, New York Times environment correspondent gave an overview of climate change reporting in the US, highlighting the obstacles and successes. The following dominant trends were noted:

- Coverage of climate change articles have patterns of ebbs and flows, with peaks in 1988, 1997, 2006/07
- Reporting of climate change issues are often in relation to politics, not climate science
- Dramatic increases in reporting have emerged in 2007.

Difficulties emerge when placing climate change news articles in the press; the issues are not a 'today' story, but rather a 'century scale phenomenon', complex for journalists to cover, with the impacts of climate change an uncertain, gradually unfolding story. Further obstacles include reporting climate change with a sense of definitiveness which is currently unavailable in the science. Andy concluded that as climate science improves, journalists should report climate change accurately in the correct context, and also that the media could make real differences in the reporting of climate change, but scientists must be taught to communicate in 'media speak'.

Max Boykoff, James Martin Research Fellow, ECI discussed further the issues presented on climate change reporting in the US. Max also briefly reviewed and compared the UK media, highlighting the language barrier between scientists and mass media; scientists tending to talk about uncertainty, speaking in caution and probability. Scientists struggle to turn these uncertainties into plain language, which does not bode well for accurate and crisp media coverage. Also, the institutional pressures when reporting the issue of human contributions to climate change, such as constraints of politics, economics, deadlines and column space, limits the depths to which journalists can delve into a particular story; all leading to informationally skewed coverage.

The discussed trends emerging in US and UK media coverage of climate change were:

- Ebbs and flows in coverage, with peaks in 1988, 1997, 2006/07
- Dramatic increases in reporting in 2006/07
- Coverage of issues and events often driven by personalisation, dramatic and/or novel events which can provide news hooks
- US – political views define the reporting styles, with Democrats and Republicans having opposing views on the issue of climate change
- UK – moral issues prevail when reporting, e.g. the race for greater emissions cuts between Labour and Conservative
- Interests from carbon-based industry helps shape news discourse, especially in the US, with scientists encouraged and paid to write articles which confuse and raise the uncertainty and aspects of climate science
- Clear divides between straight news reporting and commentary in the US press, less clear in the UK, which affects coverage of the issue

- UK tabloid newspaper reporting dominated with themes of ecology and meteorology, with the tone of headlines portraying doom and gloom scenarios.

James Painter, Visiting Fellow, RISJ presented research on media reporting via popular international television channels in six developing countries, specifically media coverage on the release day of the 2007 IPCC 'Impacts' and 'Mitigation' reports. He examined which strand of the climate change issue the media focused on; either the doom and gloom scenarios reported in the Impact report, or the possible solutions listed in the Mitigation report. Research results showed:

- Stories of doom and gloom scenarios received greater coverage
- India, Mexico and Russia had no news coverage of the two IPCC reports on their main evening news broadcasts
- Chinese and South African TV only covered the Impact report
- Only Brazil covered the Mitigation report
- African coverage lasted only 11 seconds, even though they are one of the most vulnerable continents to the influence of climate change
- India and China showed large differences in reporting between English language and domestic channels
- None of the channels reported climate change 'contrarians'
- There were no illustrations on any channel of how the poor would be affected
- Within the Impacts report, Painter found little coverage of adaptation and vulverability.

The research concluded that the Impact report received significantly more television coverage than the Mitigation report, noting that although doom and gloom style reporting could be more newsworthy, there were likely to be other factors accounting for the lack of mitigation coverage. These include: the lack of suitable mitigation type pictures, more important news stories on the day, or that the mitigation story could just be more complicated to unravel and report.

Session 2: Country case studies: what gets reported and why?

China. Paul Brown, former Guardian environment correspondent discussed journalistic training. China's journalists have serious constraints due to the dictatorship, with severe consequences for directly criticizing the government. With the Chinese government's recent decision to train journalists to report climate change, training sessions undertaken by Paul Brown have focussed on highlighting the connection between China's environmental problems and the government, but alongside the teaching of safe reporting styles, to ensure journalists were not vulnerable to heavy criticism from the government. The safe reporting methods of providing balanced reporting and ensuring that journalists were purely messengers, reporting only what they are told, was essential. Climate change provokes serious discussion in China, with Chinese journalists keen to begin writing about the issues; their willingness to do so at the expense of their own safety should not be underestimated.

Brazil. Carlos Fioravanti, Reuters Institute fellow, discussed climate change coverage, stating that Brazil-specific climate change issues have been rarely reported in the media; with preference for reporting the overseas debates. Further key points raised were:

- Brazilian newspapers have a small readership when compared to television viewers, possibly linked to a low level of education and high levels of illiteracy
- Brazilian media depends upon material from international news agencies
- Reporting of climate change has grown extensively over time, with no ebbs and flows
- Ecological and meteorological stories are frequently reported
- Predominant voices on climate change are of overseas university scientists, not Brazilians.

Mexico. Caridad Canales, ECI MSc Student presented preliminary research on influential Mexican newspapers and the links made between hurricane activity and climate change. Key emerging trends were:

- An overall increase in climate change reporting, with no ebbs and flows
- In 2005, an uncertainty on whether the increased hurricane intensity and frequency was related to climate change
- In 2007, definitive links reported between climate change and the increased intensity and frequency of hurricane activity
- The media appear to have made definite links regarding hurricane intensity and frequency, even though climate science has not
- In 2005 climate science was translated more accurately by the media than in 2007.

Africa. Vera Kwakofi, Africa and Middle East Editorial Coordinator for BBC World Service, stated that the reporting of climate change does not appear on the agenda in

African countries. Africa aspires to become industrialised, developed, and a part of the first world, with basic needs to be met, such as food security, jobs, energy security etc; environmental impacts and the links to climate change cannot be considered. Conclusions were that the only possible way to engage African people with climate change would be to highlight the links to individual's monetary savings.

Peter McEvoy, from ABC Australia and Reuters Institute fellow, reported that in **Australia** public and political views are out of step with the scientific consensus on climate change. Difficulties of reporting and highlighting climate change issues could be due to a lack of diversity in newspapers, with two thirds being owned by Rupert Murdoch, and only the cities of Sydney and Melbourne providing more than one local paper. Journalists also have to fight for column space against popular sceptics such as Andrew Bolt, noted for comparing climate scientists to cult religious groups.

More positively, the recent spate of hurricanes placed climate change back on the Australian news agenda, with reporting related to economic consequences. Lastly, Rupert Murdoch's personal views on climate change have switched, which the media might soon reflect; bringing hopes of creating heightened awareness and a furthering of public concern.

Breakout session

Chaired by Dr Joe Smith from the Open University, small group sessions discussed the question "What changes would advance climate change storytelling in the developing world?" Feedback included:

UK

- Media need to have dialogue with voices beyond climate scientists e.g. NGOs and institutions, for a wider ranging, more easily interpreted climate change discussion
- Trust needs to be built between the media and scientists, for more accurate reporting
- Personal stories from the developing world should be made more accessible, for better coverage in UK media e.g. via the internet, instead of the west reporting on their behalf
- Media should make better links from the plight of the developing world to the UK consumer, highlighting impacts.

Africa

- Improved, more substantial training for journalists, alongside a decent salary and career structure
- African journalists must develop a stronger voice, allowing them to challenge the west
- Outside media reporting should refer to Africa as a wide ranging set of countries.

China

- Government and business must demonstrate better awareness of environmental issues. With top-down enforcement from government, change could happen quickly
- Journalists having dialogue with rural villages would highlight climate change issues
- Needs to be more pressure on Chinese government from the west in regard to the lack of environmental policies.

India

- A solution focussed approach to reporting, with more positive and personalised stories of climate change effects e.g. alternative/low energy
- Better journalist training, providing knowledge to report complex climate issues, with incentives for career development within each organisation
- With Indian government currently taking advice on climate change, media engagement with NGOs and institutions in the climate debate should further developing the issue.

Event organisers

Environmental Change Institute www.eci.ox.ac.uk

The Environmental Change Institute (ECI) plays a leading role in the UK Government's three main climate research initiatives. ECI hosts the internationally-acclaimed UK Climate Impacts Programme; is a core partner in the national Tyndall Centre for Climate Change; and a lead player in the UK Energy Research Centre. It runs a world-class Masters in Environmental Change & Management with students from all over the world.

Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism www.reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) marks Oxford University's commitment to create an international research centre of excellence in the comparative study of journalism. Anchored in the recognition of the key role of independent media in open societies and the power of information in the modern world, the Institute aims to serve as the leading forum for a productive engagement between scholars from a wide range of disciplines and the practitioners of journalism.