

Poles Apart

The international reporting
of climate scepticism

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Executive Summary

This is a wide-ranging comparative study about the prevalence of climate sceptic voices in the print media in six countries: Brazil, China, France, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. More than 3,000 articles taken from two newspapers in each of the six countries were analysed over two separate three-month periods in 2007 and 2009/10. A further 1,900 articles were examined from the eight other national British newspapers over the same periods to give a more comprehensive picture of climate scepticism in the UK print media.

The main aims of the study were to track any increase in the amount of space given to sceptical voices over the two periods and to map significant differences both between countries and within the print media of the same country. Because we were also interested in exploring whether there was a correspondence between the prevalence of sceptical voices and the political leaning of a newspaper, an example of a left-leaning and a right-leaning newspaper were selected in most countries.

Before the content analysis, *Poles Apart* gives an overview of climate scepticism in different countries, and particularly in the USA, and suggests that it is predominately an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. It then surveys past research on the prevalence of scepticism in the media around the world, again drawing a distinction between countries like the USA, the UK, and Australia, where it has often been present in parts of the media, and the developing world and continental Europe where it has been largely absent.

Poles Apart goes to considerable lengths to describe the large variety of types of climate-sceptical voices that exist: from those who are sceptical that the world is warming, to those who are sceptical about the influence of humans in the warming, to those who are sceptical about the pace and extent of its impacts, to those who are sceptical about whether urgent action and government spending are necessary to combat it. The analysis attempted to separate the different types of sceptical voices, their background (professional or otherwise), and in which part of a newspaper they were most likely to appear.

The main findings of the content analysis from the six-country comparative study are the following.

First, the absolute number of articles which included sceptical voices increased for all but one (*Le Monde* in France) of the twelve newspapers over the two periods. However, expressed as a percentage of all the articles covering climate change or global warming, there were wide regional variations: strong increases in the case of the UK and US press, compared to mild increases or falls in Brazil, China, India, and France.

Second, other substantial cross-country differences exist, endorsing the view that climate scepticism is much more widespread in UK and US newspapers than in the other four countries.

- In general the UK and the US print media quoted or mentioned significantly more sceptical voices than the other four countries. Together they represented more than 80% of the times such voices were quoted across all six countries.
- Over 40% of the articles where such voices were included were to be found in the opinion pages and editorials as compared to the news pages. But the print media in Brazil, China, India, and France had many fewer such pieces than those in the UK and the USA.
- Politicians represented around a third of all the sceptical voices quoted or mentioned, compared to the lower share (about a fifth) of university climate scientists. But the UK and American newspapers were much more likely to quote politicians than the newspapers in other countries. The four Anglo-Saxon newspapers accounted for 86% of all the times politicians were quoted. France was the only other country to quote national politicians, whilst the other three countries either quoted none or politicians from other countries.
- The sceptics who question the role that human factors play in global warming had a higher incidence in the print media in Brazil, China, India, and France, representing nearly 90% of the sceptics quoted or mentioned. This compared with a figure of around 60% for the USA and the UK.

Third, there is strong evidence that in the countries where sceptical voices appear in greater numbers, they are more likely to be found in right-leaning than left-leaning print media. In Brazil, France, and India, where few sceptic voices appear, there was little or no difference in the prevalence of sceptical viewpoints between the two print media chosen. However, in the case of the Anglophone countries, there does seem to

be a correspondence between the perspective of a newspaper and the prevalence of sceptical voices:

- Over the two periods, in percentage terms in the UK, the left-leaning *Guardian/Observer* had fewer articles with sceptical voices than the right-leaning *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* (11% compared to 19%), despite the former's extensive coverage of 'Climategate'. In the USA, the *NYT* had slightly less than the *WSJ* (25% compared to 28%).
- However, the distinction is much more marked in the opinion pieces and editorials. The *Telegraphs* and *WSJ* had considerably more uncontested sceptical opinion pieces and/or editorials than the *Guardian* and *NYT*. For example, in the second period the *Guardian* had 11 opinion pieces including sceptical voices, but 9 of them were essentially dismissive of sceptical views. In contrast, the *Daily/Sunday Telegraph* included 24 opinion pieces of which over half expressed an essentially sceptical viewpoint. Likewise, over the two periods, in all of the opinion pieces in the *NYT* containing sceptical voices, the author disputed climate scepticism or rejected it. In contrast, of the 17 opinion pieces found in the *WSJ*, only one fitted this category.

The main findings from the study of ten UK national newspapers can be summarised thus:

- In general, the data suggests a strong correspondence between the perspective of a newspaper and the prevalence of sceptical voices within it, particularly on the opinion pages. By most measures (but not all), the more right-leaning tend to have more such voices, the left-leaning less.
- Over the two periods, in all ten newspapers there was an increase both in the absolute numbers of articles with sceptical voices in them and the percentage of articles with sceptical voices in them. However, the increase in the number of voices was most marked for the right-leaning *Express*, *Mail*, and *Star*. These were also the three newspapers that in the second period had the highest percentage figures. The *Express* had the most at 50% of all its articles quoting or mentioning sceptics, followed by the *Mail* (48%) and the *Star* (39%). This contrasted with the *Mirror* at 13%.

- Sceptical voices got a considerable airing in opinion pieces and editorials in all ten newspapers, although it is clearly more marked in some newspapers than others. Expressed as a percentage of the total number of articles mentioning climate change or global warming, in period 2 the *Sun* had the highest percentage (more than half), followed by the *Telegraph*, the *Express*, *The Times*, and the *Mail*. All five are right-leaning.
- The three more left-leaning newspapers (*Guardian*, *Independent*, and *Mirror*) had the lowest percentages of uncontested opinion pieces and editorials quoting sceptics; between them they had only 10 of the opinion pieces by sceptical authors of the total of 70 over the two periods; and they had no editorials quoting sceptical voices which were left uncontested.
- The right-wing *Express* newspapers in particular stood out for including sceptical voices: in the second period, it had the highest percentage of articles which included sceptical voices, the highest number of sceptical voices quoted or mentioned in its news reporting (more than any broadsheet), the highest number of direct quotes from sceptics, the highest number of editorials questioning the mainstream consensus, and the highest number of sceptical opinion pieces of any tabloid.
- The Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF) has been particularly successful in getting its views reported across most of the 10 newspapers. The two most quoted sceptics by far in the second period were Lord Lawson and Benny Peiser (more than 80 times between them), both from the GWPF. This compares with the 13 times for the most quoted climate-sceptic scientist (Professor Ian Plimer).

The content analysis did not set out to explain the differences between countries and within them. However, the wider analysis in the individual country studies suggests that the presence or absence of sceptical voices is determined by a complex mix of processes within newspapers (such as political ideology, journalistic practices, editorial culture, or the influence of editors and proprietors) and external societal forces (in particular the presence of sceptical political parties, the power of sceptical lobbying groups, the public profile of sceptical scientists, a country's energy matrix, the presence of web-based scepticism, or even a country's direct experience of a changing climate).

The weight of this study would suggest that, out of this wide range of factors, the presence of politicians espousing some variation of climate scepticism, the existence of organised interests that feed sceptical coverage, and partisan media receptive to this message, all play a particularly significant role in explaining the greater prevalence of sceptical voices in the print media of the USA and the UK. In these two countries climate change has become (to different degrees) more of a politicised issue, which politically polarised print media pick up on and reflect. This helps to explain why Brazil, India, France, and other countries in continental Europe have (to different degrees) a politically divided print media, but do not have the same prevalence of sceptical voices.