Reassessing How the Media Covers Climate Change and the Environment

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 30 years, polarization regarding environmental issues has caused political division between U.S. political parties. Beliefs regarding climate change have become a marker of political affiliation with generalizations made concerning conservative or liberal perspectives. Past media coverage has demonstrated conservative media is more likely to be on the opposing spectrum when tailoring towards the environment than liberal or mainstream media. Yet, there is no answer to the degree to which they differ or reach a consensus. This leads to important implications for members of society, specifically environmental communication scholars who search for methods to grow public support for climate change. Additionally, providing a better understanding of the phenomena of how environmental support remains high despite conflicting opinions from media coverage. In this study, as a research assistant team we hand-coded transcripts between 1990 and 2020 based on various key variables to assess the tonality of news coverage (CNN and Fox News). Among others key variables include whether media coverage addresses the issue on a factual or opinionated basis and the overall support level demonstrated throughout the transcript regarding specific environmental issues. For example, preliminary findings have found Republican news coverage supports climate change in the intensity support level variable (Dnt_Int), though they may also broadcast unsupportive messages. Exploring the frames of how partisan-leaning media targets its viewers' opinions is crucial to overcoming confirmation bias and revealing effective communication strategies for politicians and educators alike to increase support for political action on environmental issues.

RESEARCH QUESTION

- In what ways does the coverage of the environment both differ between media sources and over time?

INTRODUCTION

NASA scientists have reported 15 of the 16 warmest years on record since 2016. A US Gallup poll in 2001 found 61% of voters believed human activities are the cause of climate change (Bolin & Hamilton, 2018). Although the US Gallup poll demonstrates such a percentage, American public opinion has become increasingly polarized on climate change and the environment. Media coverage is implicated through partisan coverage filtering (Merkley & Stecula, 2020). This phenomenon describes how news networks cover only selected information, impacting viewers to receive only a biased set of facts. Yet, the tonality used by news anchors to discuss climate change and the environment has changed throughout the past 30 years, providing an intriguing insight into how viewers have received environmental news and how this shapes their perceptions.

Through this research we hope to understand effective communication strategies for politicians and educators alike to increase support for political action on environmental issues, reaching a more nuanced scope of the media landscape. One of the main variables, direction intensity, refers to media tonality using a scale to assess the level of support for a mentioned environmental issue.

The following definitions will expand on the concepts presented:

- **Partisan coverage filtering**: Occurrence in partisan-leaning media that influences media viewers to receive the biased facts presented by said media.

- **Tonality**: Expressing tone; in this case, the tone utilized by CNN or Fox News anchor in covering environmental issues.

METHODS

We collected a random sample of transcripts from CNN and Fox News that addressed environmental issues with keywords over the past 30 years. Transcripts were hand-coded based on the following key variables:

1. **Environment:** Does the transcript refer to the environment, so specific it would be titled under an environmental concept?
2. **Direction intensity (Dnt_Int):** Is the media coverage supportive or in agreement with the environmental problem or is it neutral or does it downplay the environmental issue.
3. **Expert**: Not a mention of "scientists say," instead is there a direct excerpt of an expert citation or reference?
4. **Coverage**: What is the coverage over? (e.g., factual, policy, problem, political, other).
5. **Factual**: Like dnt_int, a scale between 1-3 where 1 is "strongly opinion-oriented" and 3 is "strongly or somewhat fact-oriented," while N/A is presenting a speech or press conference.
6. **Connect:** Is the coverage interconnected with a policy area? (such as jobs, economy etc.).
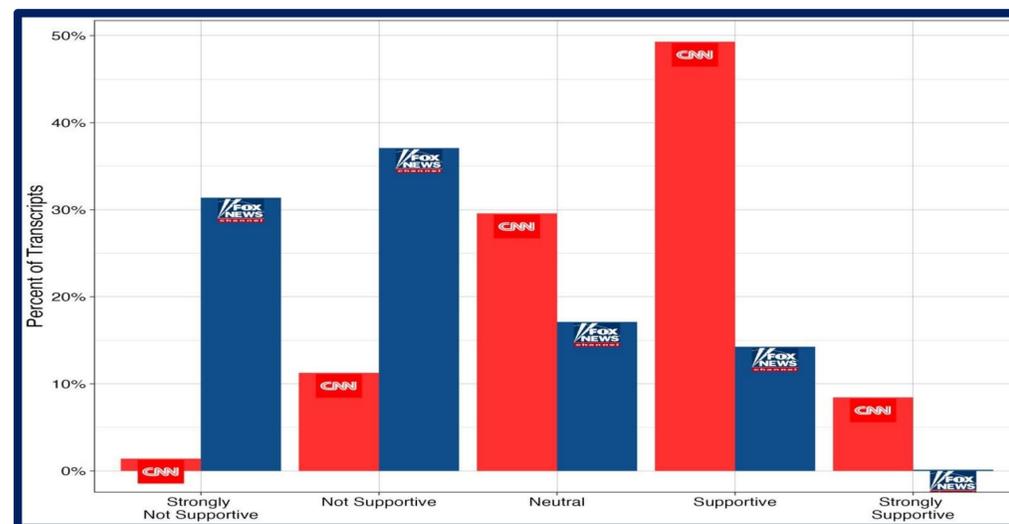
RESULTS

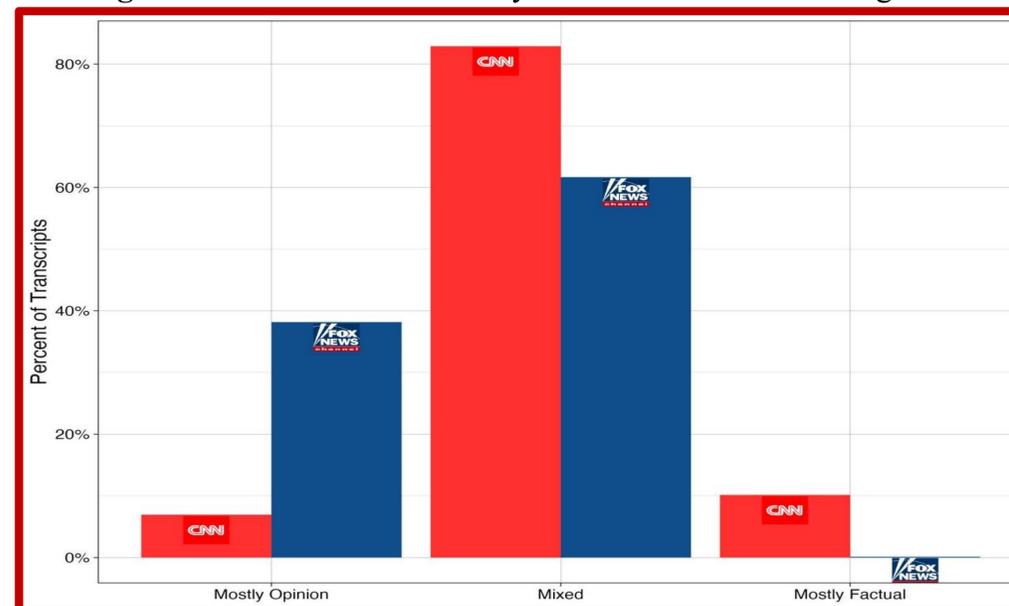**Figure I**: Direction and Intensity of Environmental Coverage

Figure II: Opinion Vs. Factual Coverage

DISCUSSION

News media stations such as Fox News, predominantly right-wing, were more likely to speak negatively or deny issues concerning the environment. Yet, Fox News anchor Bill Hemmer in transcript 168 when speaking about republican Senator McCain,

"A Republican who believes in the impact of climate change; some might think the world is spinning on a different axis, Nancy."- Fox News, 2008.

There were still frequent occurrences of support for the environment, despite demonstrating denial of left-winged policies in certain cases. This concept can be applied to CNN with host Glenn Beck criticizing Al Gore's policies and statements, describing him as a "hypocrite" and a "lunatic". Beck only disagreed with Al Gore due to partisan differences not because he did not believe in climate change and the environment being a news anchor for CNN. This work contributes towards reaching a nuanced scope of the media landscape, as well as strategies for educators and politicians to implement when communicating environmental issues.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Environmental issues are known as a valence issue, meaning there is common consensus with voters that the environment should be sustainable for all to enjoy. A future research recommendation is having two sets of work, one concerning a media statement regarding environmental issues, while the other set analyzes how it is framed. This would focus on specific details of the media coverage, reaching an in-depth perspective on media tonality. Through a study such as that one, importance of environmental coverage can be highlighted, as well as reaching a nuanced scope of the media landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Merkley, E., & Stecula, D. A. (2020). Party Cues in the News: Democratic Elites, Republican Backlash, and the Dynamics of Climate Skepticism. *British Journal of Political Science*, *51*(4), 1439–1456. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123420000113 (Merkley & Stecula, 2020)