



Reassessing How Media Cover Climate Change and the Environment

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Introduction

Media coverage of climate change varies across different cable news networks. With partisan-leaning news networks especially, the tonality and rhetoric used by anchors to discuss climate change provides interesting and necessary insight into how society has received environmental news in the past 30 or so years. Prior literature suggests there are stark differences between how partisan media covers climate change, and these differences have shaped the opinion of viewers. Yet, curiously, a majority of Republicans still support various policies to mitigate and adapt to climate change, a statistic most of the public is misinformed about. This project focuses on the similarities and differences in how partisan media has covered environmental issues from 1990 to 2021, an era of important events in national and international climate policy, in order to capture a more nuanced picture of the media landscape, and to help identify effective environmental communication strategies moving forward.

Methods

To accomplish this task, we collected a random sample of transcripts from CNN, FOX, and MSNBC over the past 30 years. Transcripts were selected based on key words related to the environment. Once our sample was selected, transcripts were hand-coded based on the following key variables:

- Insult:** was the environment used as an insult (e.g. those planet-murdering capitalists)?
- Environment:** was the environment substantively talked about (if no, cease coding transcript)?
- Topic:** what is primarily being discussed about the environment (e.g. climate change, extreme weather, pollution)?
- Support:** how supportive of the environment is the coverage?
- Expert:** is an expert or study referenced?
 - Coverage: what is the coverage primarily about (policy, politics, facts, problems/events, etc.)?
 - Factual: is coverage more factual or opinionated?
 - Connect: is environmental discussion connected to other policy area (e.g., religion, jobs, national security, energy)?

Results

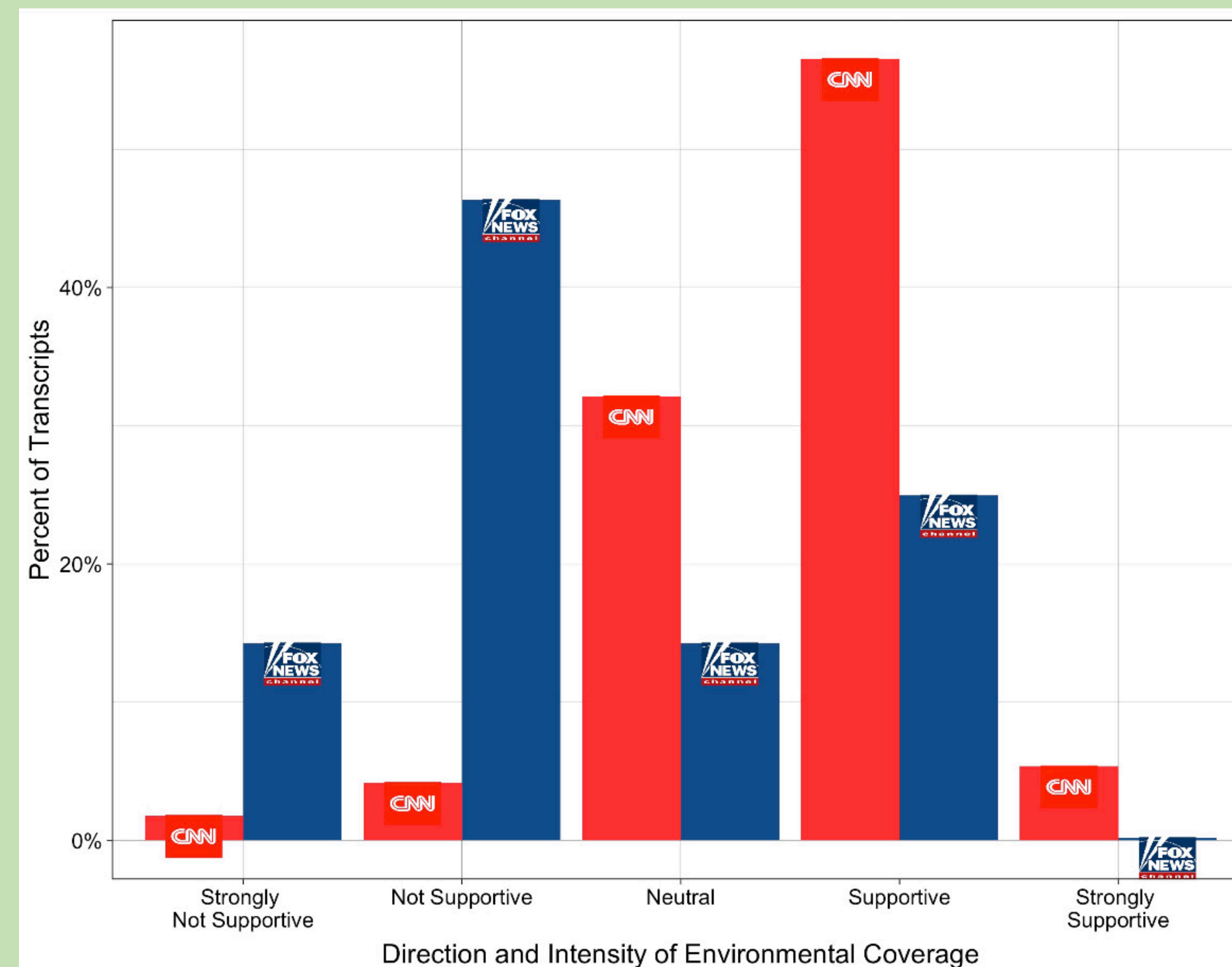


Figure 1 displays the direction intensity of environmental coverage. Based on this indication, a majority of the time CNN's coverage is supportive and FOX News' is not.

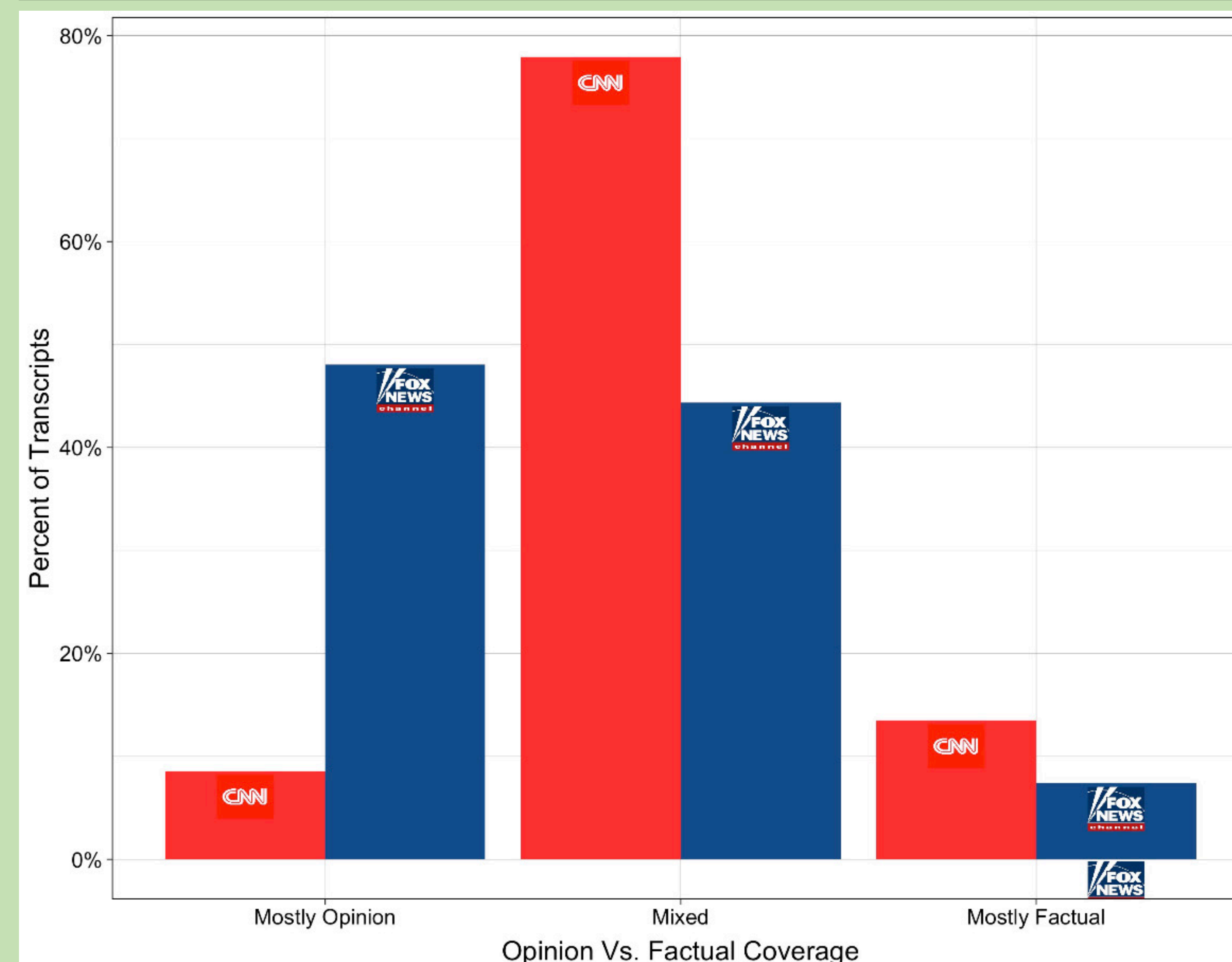


Figure 2 displays the opinion vs. factual coverage by the media sources on this topic. CNN and FOX News both have high percentages of mixed results, with CNN's being very high. FOX News also had high numbers of mostly opinion.

Conclusions

News sources that were predominantly right-wing were more likely to speak negatively about issues concerning the environment than other news sources. For example, FOX coverage had an average support of 20%, while CNN was much closer to 50% (see Figure 1). This suggests that a majority of coverage by FOX was not supportive, with a small percentage being neutral on the matter.

Another important difference in coverage emerges when looking at the manner at which the environment is discussed. CNN is more likely than FOX to discuss the environment using factual statements (Figure 2), with 15% of coverage being fact-based while FOX's numbers were around 8%. FOX's coverage is concentrated in the opinion-based areas and the mixed areas, meaning fact and opinion. CNN's is a majority of mixed areas, nearly reaching 80%.

This research has indicated that cable news coverage of the environment is more complicated than prior work has led on. Most of the time spent talking about the environment is done so in a positive light. What is left to better understand are the differences between how the environment is covered. Does FOX avoid discussing climate change? How does positive coverage of the environment differ between the cable news companies?

References

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