

# Covering the Climate: How the American News Media Reports on the Environment



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## Introduction

The project aims to identify how coverage of environmental topics by news media outlets affects the way audiences perceive the issue, as well as how news outlets target their audience in the way that they cover these environmental issues.

The database that the research team used for analysing this media coverage consisted of CNN and Fox News transcripts that were then hand coded and sorted into various different metrics of analysis, including the level of support for climate change and the level of opinionated or factual content within the transcripts. This material was then used to derive statistically significant trends showing how media coverage targets its audiences, and how that coverage manifests itself in outlet-specific or general trends.

It is important to note that environmental support within America remains generally high regardless of polarization fueled by news coverage of climate change and associated environmental topics, and that this project also aims to clarify the reasoning behind this statement. How news coverage of different environmental topics varies within each news organization, as well as compared to each other, is also clarified by this project.

This project analyses how partisan media outlets cover climate change and environmental issues can guide how politicians and other members of our information and political systems should communicate with the general public over these environmental issues.

## Key Terms

- Climate change: The theory that there is a current and permanent shift in the temperature and climate of Earth, including rising temperatures and sea levels
- Transcripts: A textual version of a script, in this case to TV news broadcasts
- Coding: To categorize and note down specific sections of a transcript based on certain qualitative categories for future analysis

## Methods

This research project used a database of 240 transcripts from CNN and Fox News, which were manually coded and analyzed for various metrics. The specific metrics analyzed were:

- What is the numerical ID of the transcript?
- Do the contents of the transcript concern the environment in any way?
- What was the primary topic of environmental coverage in the transcript?
  - Optionally, what was the secondary topic of environmental coverage?
- How supportive the contents of the transcript are in covering the environmental issue?
- Is there presence of expert testimony or consultation in the transcript?
- Was the transcript primarily about environmental policy, politics, factual coverage, or a specific environmental problem?
- How fact or opinion-oriented was the transcript?
- Did the transcript have any coverage of another related policy issue, such as jobs, economy, public health, national security, social justice, energy, religion, etc.?
- How difficult the transcript was to code?

The analysis of our study specifically focused on the actions of anchors and reporters covering environmental issues, not panelists or guests; this meant analysing the news media employees' coverage, even in debates. We broke down transcripts into two separate analysed codes if there were two distinct environmental topics covered in the same transcript.

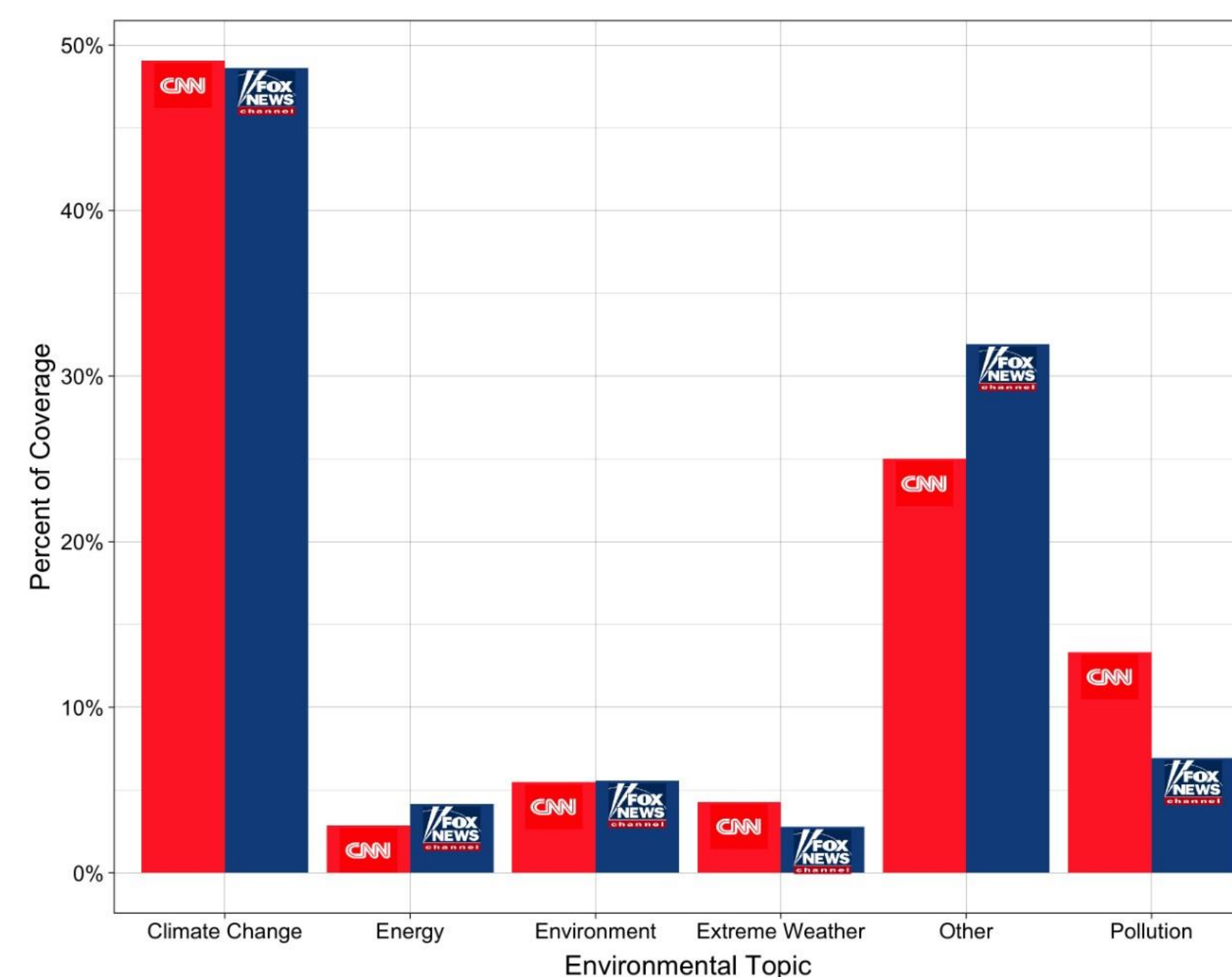
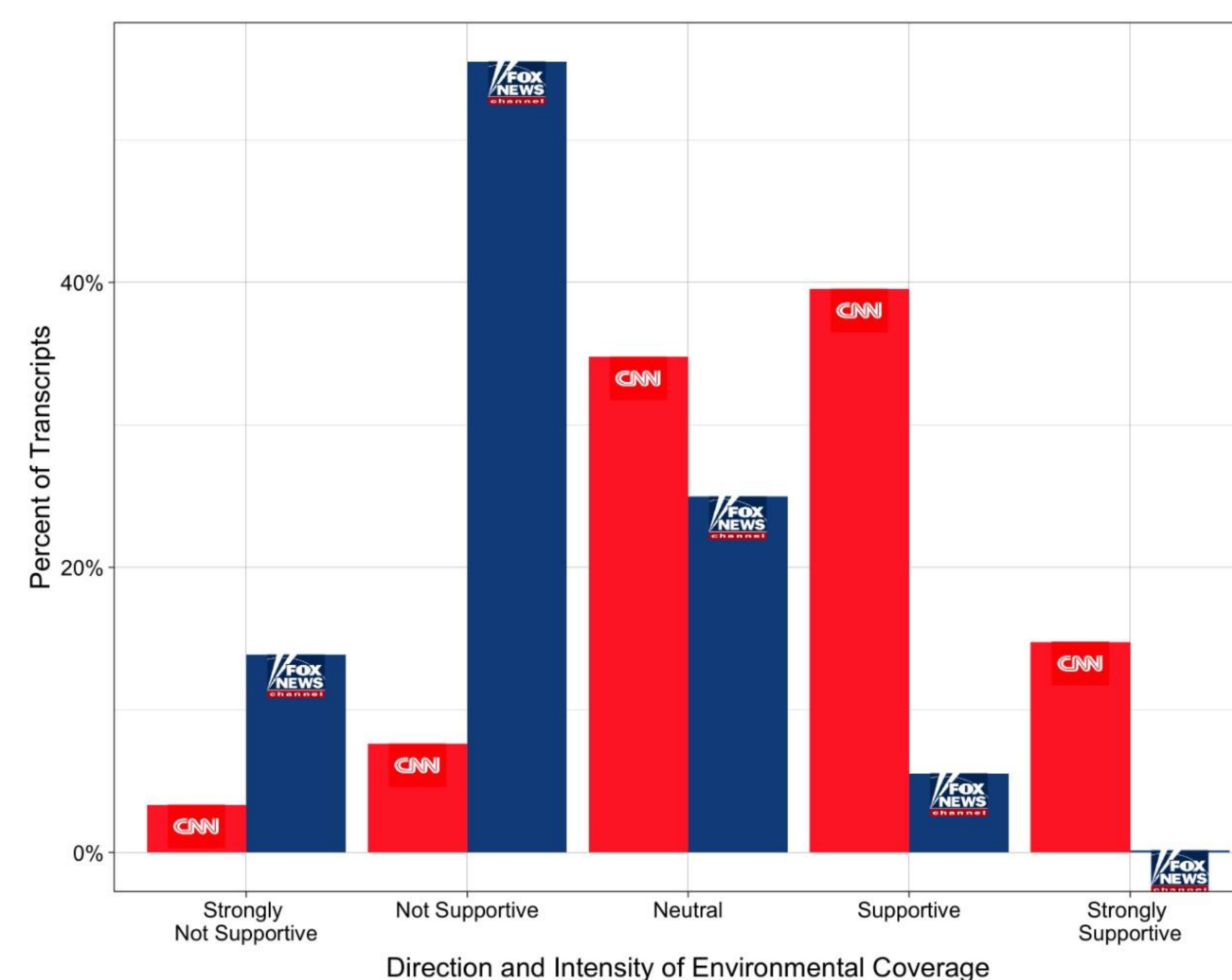
## Results



Fox News Channel



Cable News Network (CNN)



## Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that there is a significant difference in the way that CNN and Fox News cover environmental topics. CNN was found to be more supportive and neutral in their coverage, while Fox News was more likely to be not supportive. Both CNN and Fox News overwhelmingly covered climate change as their main environmental topic with over 50% of coverage being on climate change. All other topics were negligibly covered except for pollution and other topics. Pollution coverage mainly focused on carbon emissions and made up 20% of coverage when combining both news outlets.

The most important takeaway out of this study is that while media coverage may contribute to polarization, the majority of coverage is still neutral or supportive of environmental issues.

However, the paucity of data in the sample, especially for Fox News, makes it difficult to identify anything meaningful in the data. Despite this limitation, the study provides insight into the ways in which news media outlets target their audiences and how this coverage affects public perception.

Overall, the findings of this research project suggest that news coverage can play a significant role in shaping public opinion on environmental issues, and that there is a need for balanced and factual coverage across news media outlets to ensure the public is accurately informed about these critical issues.

## Public Policy Recommendations

- Encourage and support media outlets to provide accurate and balanced coverage of environmental issues, particularly climate change, in order to promote greater public understanding and awareness of these issues.
- Develop and implement policies and programs that promote clean energy and energy efficiency, as well as incentivize businesses and individuals to reduce their carbon footprint.
- Work with the media to develop messaging strategies that effectively communicate the urgency of climate action and the benefits of reducing carbon emissions to the general public.

## Future Research Implications

- In future research, it may be useful to analyze a larger and more diverse set of news outlets to compare how different media outlets cover environmental issues, in addition to expanding the sample size.
- Incorporating additional metrics for analysis, such as the tone of coverage, audience engagement with environmental news, and social media responses, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of media coverage on environmental issues.
- Future research can also consider examining how media coverage of environmental issues influences public opinion and policy decisions, and how these changes in opinion and policy can affect the environment and society.

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