Climate: The science may be settled, but the press coverage isn’t

Enlarge / A climate activist wearing a mask of US President Donald Trump hands out leaflets at a protest action during the eleventh day of demonstrations by the climate change action group Extinction Rebellion, at Gatwick Airport, in Crawley, south of London on October 17, 2019. Activists from the environmental campaign group Extinction Rebellion have vowed to challenge a blanket protest ban imposed by the London police. (Photo by Glyn KIRK / AFP) (Photo by GLYN KIRK/AFP via Getty Images)
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Lots of the mainstream press has struggled with a desire to maintain what they think is objectivity in the face of scientific evidence. On matters like evolution and climate change, major outlets have instead tried to present balance between two opposing sides. But this was so obviously problematic that John Oliver made fun of it, so we must be doing better now, right?

Maybe not. New research from Brown University’s Rachel Wetts suggests that major newspapers are still more likely to feature the views of business interests and still overrepresent people who don’t seem to accept the reality of climate change.

Bad PR

How do you measure who has the most influence on press coverage? There's a whole industry devoted to exercising that influence: public relations. Among the other things they do, PR people put together press releases designed to attract attention (as their name implies) from the press. So, Wetts simply obtained about 1,800 press releases from a mix of organizations: businesses and trade groups, the government, and public interest groups.

To find the ones that were actually having an influence, Wetts used a database of about 35,000 articles from three outlets: The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and USA Today. These cover the same time period as the press releases, from 1985 to 2014. Anti-plagiarism software was then used to pick up instances where some of the wording in the press release showed up in a news report. Wetts also scored these press releases as to whether they agreed with the scientific consensus or not.

There are a couple of limitations in this approach. One is simply that 2014, while it set a record for the hottest year on record, has been eclipsed by every year since—in some cases by a substantial amount. This has helped shift the tone of public arguments, making most objections to the science increasingly untenable. The sort of coverage that's likely to appear in these newspapers has undoubtedly shifted accordingly.

The other issue is that short fragments of text would be enough to trigger a positive match from the software. It's entirely possible that some of these presented an argument from a press release simply in order to criticize it. Wetts acknowledges that possibility but suggests even those cases represent an instance where an organization is successfully getting its ideas to the public—one of the goals of press

releases.

Who’s in, who’s out?

Wetts had a collection of hypotheses that she thought the data could address. One was the issue that we mentioned earlier: is the press’s desire to provide a balanced perspective resulting in the use of material from organizations opposed to action against climate change? But there were some less obvious hypotheses, too, mostly focused on the coverage being driven by the societal power of the organization sending out the release. So, Wetts looked into whether larger organizations had their words featured more often or whether wealthy businesses or trade organizations had an outsized influence.

The two other hypotheses she looked at related to the influence of the interested parties when it comes to climate change: industries that generate lots of greenhouse gases and scientific organizations that are providing data on the state of the climate.

The big picture shows that, over the course of the period studied, the mainstream press was still suffering from a degree of false balance. Only 10 percent of the press releases selected by Wetts advocated against action to address climate change. Yet over 18 percent of the press releases that were echoed by these three newspapers had adopted that position. Note that means that a large majority of the PR favored taking action; it’s just that the small number of contrary releases received attention out of proportion to its volume.

Now, you might immediately suspect The Wall Street Journal, which has an editorial page dedicated to various forms of climate denial, might drive that trend. But that wasn’t the case; even The New York Times showed a similar pattern. If you thought that would change over time, the evidence has continued to roll in and given us no reason to revise our conclusions about climate change. Yet Wetts found no

indication that things were changing over the time span of her study.

Beyond that, a few of the hypotheses are simple to evaluate, in that they're wrong. For one thing, it's simply not a matter of money. There was no relationship between an organization's assets or revenue with the press's tendency to cover their releases. Companies in the extraction industries are no more or less likely to see the press releases covered, as well. The same was true for educational institutions. Organizations that are focused on scientific or technical services are actually *less* likely to see their PR picked up in these newspapers; less than three percent of their releases were echoed in the newspapers, compared to nearly 10 percent of organizations in general.

Big business

But two conditions did seem to matter. One is that businesses and coalitions of companies had better success with having their press releases echoed in the newspapers. That effect was largely driven by large companies or coalitions. Government agencies and advocacy groups saw the opposite effect: the smaller they were, the more likely that their press releases would end up attracting attention in coverage. But the levels attracted by these organizations fell short of the attention drawn by businesses.

It's worth pointing out that a large number of businesses support taking action on climate change and that most of the press releases during this period also favored action. And it's fair to say that business interests have a large influence on policy in the US, which makes their thoughts worth press coverage. The issue is that this attention is combined with a disproportionate attention to the minority perspective that's opposed to doing something about the threat of climate change.

What the study could really use is something that can’t be performed by an algorithm: a detailed look at how the shared text is being used within press reports. Given the size of the data, it’s unreasonable to expect that Wetts could do this herself (here’s hoping she gets some grad students to throw at the problem). But it would also be good to have this system streamlined so that it could perform this sort of analysis closer to real time, which could help us identify problematic trends in journalism before they get out of hand.

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