



International conference

Climate change controversies in the media Sociological insights

20th & 21st SEPTEMBER 2010
PARIS

Maison des Sciences de la communication du CNRS
20 rue Berbier-du-Mets
750013 Paris

Organising Committee

Jean-Baptiste COMBY, Associate Professor in Media and Political Sociology at the Institut Français de Presse, CARISM, University of Paris II

Helene GUILLEMOT, Postdoctoral Fellow in Science Studies at the Koyré Center, CNRS

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Sponsors

Climate-Environment-Society consortium
CNRS Communication Sciences Institute

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Registration: http://www.gisclimat.fr/controversies_registration_form

Events over the past year — most notably the Copenhagen conference, controversies over the IPCC, and more recently the Gulf oil spill — have significantly shaped news coverage on climate change, likely marking a new era or stage in the issue's "narrative cycle". However, the interpretation of these events and their symbolic power depend on social and historical conditions that give them meaning and relevance. That's why their impact on changes in news coverage is likely to differ in important ways across national settings.

One of the main differences resides in the quantity as well as content of media attention to controversies on climate change. In France for instance, discordant points of view (scientifically or politically) had little media exposure in the first decade of the years 2000, whereas "climate sceptics" had high public visibility in the US media landscape.

Sociological approaches help to explain these differences. They reveal a) how the climate issue's "newsworthiness" depends on the ways relevant social groups are structured and linked together at any given point in time, b) how they successfully access the media, and c) how issue framing is conditioned by the interplay of oft-competing social agendas.

Invited papers will present different case studies or comparisons (US, UK, France, Portugal, Sweden, Germany, India, Brazil...), and endeavour to explain how climate change is "manufactured" in the media of these countries. They will focus on controversies and seek to better understand when, how, why and where controversies about climate change appeared and moved within different public spaces (media, Internet, books, documentaries, etc.) in the last twenty years. We think this comparative perspective will provide insights into larger patterns as well as specifically national dynamics. It might also help to understand the relevance of controversies to societal decision-making and public understanding.

We propose to structure the conference around the following hypothesis: public problems have distinct "careers" or "trajectories", and offer more or less space to controversies at different moments. New framings can be explained by changing social configurations of the issue's "ownership" (Gusfield), as well as context-dependent and dynamically negotiated relationships between scientists, state agencies, NGOs or journalists.

Such an angle invites the crossing of two sociological traditions. First, the sociology of public/social problems studies how facts or situations become problems to be taken in charge by the media, the political field, courts, the educational system, the market, individuals, etc. Second, the sociology of controversies analyses how scientific facts are manufactured and how scientific disagreements, controversies or debates stay confined or circulate in different public arenas.

In the face of recent controversies on climate change ("climategate"), the topic is of high relevance. We thus hope our collective work during one and a half day can advance a common understanding for fruitful questions, approaches, and research agendas.

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PROGRAMME

Monday 20th September

9h00 Welcome speeches by organisers and representatives from the Climate-Environment-Society consortium and the CNRS Communication Sciences Institute

9h30 An introduction about how political sociology meets media studies for understanding issue definition, public problems and controversies
Pierre LEFÉBURE, Associate Professor in political science and communication at the Political Studies Institute, Bordeaux University

10h00 The frame contest over climate change in the U.S. media. Exaggerated fears and overlooked impacts
Matthew NISBET, Associate Professor at the School of Communication, American University, Washington D.C.

10h45 Coffee break

11h15 Mediations of climate change in Portugal. Mapping the links between discourses and social representations of knowledge and risk
Anabela CARVALHO, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Sciences of the University of Minho in Portugal

12h00 Consensus, controversies and the construction of climate change as a public problem in France
Stefan AYKUT, Hélène GUILLEMOT and Jean-Baptiste COMBY

12h45 Lunch

14h30 Climate change skepticism, denial and the Swedish media
Marcus CARSON, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Stockholm University Senior Fellow, Stockholm Environment Institute
Marcus will also introduce the Compon project

15h15 Disputed climate science in the media: do countries matter?
Reiner GRUNDMANN, Senior Researcher at Aston University

16h00 Coffee break

16h30 United Kingdom media coverage of climate change
Max BOYKOFF, Associate Professor at the University of Colorado-Boulder.

17h15 How can public problem sociology and controversies sociology help/complement each other ?
Olivier BAISNEE, Associate Professor at the Political Studies Institute, Toulouse University
(To be confirmed)

Tuesday 21th September

9h00 The IPCC between science and politics
Amy DAHAN, Director of Research in History of Science at the CNRS, Centre Alexandre Koyré (CNRS-EHESS)

9h45 Roundtable

What do the media really do to climate change ?

Matthew NISBET, Anabela CARVALHO, Marcus CARSON
Reiner GRUNDMANN, Max BOYKOFF

11h30 Coffee Break

12h00 Conclusions and future prospects
Stefan AYKUT, Jean-Baptiste COMBY, Hélène GUILLEMOT

13h00 End of the meeting

Practical information

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ABSTRACTS

Matthew NISBET

The frame contest over climate change in the U.S. media Exaggerated fears and overlooked impacts

As U.S. policymakers continue debate over climate change legislation, the Climategate affair and the Gulf oil disaster have contributed to significant shifts in how the issue has been characterized in the U.S. media and in political discourse. For climate scientists, having spent eight years calling attention to what they believed was political wrongdoing by the Bush administration, in the wake of Climategate, they now find themselves on the other end of the same allegations. Despite the promise of an Obama presidency, many advocates for climate action now see themselves losing a “war” against “anti-science” forces allied with energy companies and the Republican Party. Meanwhile, scientists have been urged by liberal strategists and commentators to “fight back”—by forming their own political action committees and openly supporting “pro-science” candidates.

Despite these fears and calls to political action, evidence suggests that the influence of Climategate and climate skeptics more generally is overestimated, and that the Gulf oil spill has led to a renewed focus among political leaders and the public on environmental protection over economic growth. In addition, key dimensions of the climate change debate such as public health risks and national security implications continue to be under emphasized by experts and dramatically under reported in the U.S. media. Recent studies conclude that these dimensions are likely to be compelling and personally relevant to broad audiences, especially when they are covered in the context of policy proposals that are likely to lead to benefits to society rather than simply economic costs.

Anabela CARVALHO

Mediations of climate change in Portugal Mapping the links between discourses and social representations of knowledge and risk

The social construction of climate change involves a multiplicity of social actors whose voices get amplified, contested or silenced in the media. Despite the alternatives that are found in today’s complex media environment, mainstream media continue to act as hubs for the “takeoff” and “landing” of most arguments and debates. Analysing the discourses of such media on climate change is therefore of critical importance. Researchers need to trace the emergence of given forms of intelligibility of the issue and the processes through which they are reinforced and consensualized, or instead challenged and marginalized. Moreover, capturing the connections between communicative practices and perceptions, attitudes and behaviours poses a number of problems to research; still, there is a vital need to design and develop analytical tools for doing so. This paper will focus on the social circulation of meanings of cli-

mate change in Portugal. Taking the media as a central arena for understandings of the state of knowledge and risk associated to climate change, I will present the main conclusions of a project that included analyses of media and social actors’ discourses, and studies on social representations through a variety of methods. I will also draw comparisons with countries where higher levels of denialism and public scepticism have been registered and identify some of the contextual differences.

Stefan AYKUT, Jean-Baptiste COMBY, H el ene GUILLEMOT

Consensus, controversies and the construction of climate change as a public problem in France

Our intervention will concentrate on the construction of the climate change issue in French media (print and TV), and question the relationship between the public problem’s career (Becker) and the visibility of different types of controversies.

Thanks to our empirical data, we can roughly distinguish three phases in the media coverage of the issue: in the first phase, until approximately 2003, the issue is not yet consolidated; uncertainties have high and controversial points of view some visibility. In a second phase, from 2003 to 2009 the issue’s “newsworthiness” has increased through the collective construction of a strong consensus. Divergent opinions and claims have some difficulties to access the media in this phase, and when they do succeed, they tend to provoke strong reactions. With recent developments, we might have entered a third phase by 2009, where all kinds of controversies get unprecedented public visibility.

Following the media analysis, we will investigate the links between the publicization of the issue in the three phases and the underlying social configurations of the problem’s “ownership”. We will concentrate on four kinds of “owners”: journalists, climate scientists, environmentalists (NGOs) and state officials (agencies, politicians, institutions).

Although we do not have systematic data for the most recent phase, we will present some exploratory analyses and come with methodological and theoretical suggestions. The aim is to produce sociological explanations far from the fears, myths and beliefs that feed most of the interpretations about climate change controversies’ public visibility.

Marcus CARSON

Climate change skepticism, denial and the Swedish media

About the COMPON project

The project’s acronym COMPON stands for COMparing climate change POLicy Networks. The COMPON project employs methods of policy network and discourse analysis to trace the inter-organizational relationships and interactions through which advocacy coalitions recruit support and exert political influence. The policy network approach pertains to the nature and

quality of network relationships among organizations engaged in a national policy domain. To the network approach we add techniques for studying the discourse fields within policy domains – the clustering of organizations around different frameworks of interpretation. The combination of networks and discourse clusters allows us to study the mobilization processes among engaged organizations at unprecedented systemic detail and inclusiveness.

About climate change coverage in the Swedish media 1998-2009

The project concerns the cross-national comparison of the institutions, ideas and interests that have generated widely divergent national policy responses to global climate change. Mainstream media coverage of climate change can be expected to reflect national norms, beliefs and attitudes about the role of the state regulation, at the same time it acts as an influence upon their ongoing development. As part of its overall analysis, the COMPON project in Sweden has included a content analysis of news media coverage in 3 major newspapers over the 12 year period from 1998-2009. In addition, we have analyzed the far smaller number of news articles, editorial articles, and editorial letters expressing climate skepticism and denial to identify the nature of their core arguments, sources to which they refer for expertise and credibility, and demographic profile of frequent contributors, and to see what systematic biases might be identifiable in the Swedish media. Overall, we find that mainstream news coverage of global climate change closely parallels many of the institutional and cultural characteristics attributed to Swedish policy.

Reiner GRUNDMANN

Disputed climate science in the media: do countries matter?

In previous research (Climate Change and Knowledge Politics 2007) I analysed quality print press coverage of climate change in the US and Germany, looking especially at the mentioning of scientists that are regarded as sceptics or as advocates of urgent action. This dataset stopped in 2004. I now have a much bigger Corpus which will allow me not only to update this dataset, but to go beyond the original analysis by including media coverage of two other, related issues. One is the so called “hockey stick” controversy, the other the “Climategate” affair. I will analyse the discursive framing of these issues, paying special attention to national differences and commonalities.

Max BOYKOFF

United Kingdom media coverage of climate change

Many dynamic, non-linear, contested and complex factors contribute to how media portray facets of climate change. In this talk, I will appraise salient and swirling contextual factors as well as competing journalistic pressures and norms that contribute to how issues, events and information have often become climate “news” in the United Kingdom. I will specifically focus on how particular problems and snags in the web of interaction between science, media, policy and the public have contributed to critical misperceptions, misleading debates, and divergent understandings – that are detrimental to efforts that seek to enlarge rather than constrict the spectrum of possibility for responses to climate challenges. I will work to situate these dynamics in the context of a wider “cultural politics of climate change”, where formal climate

science and governance link with everyday activities in the public sphere.

I will pursue these themes of media and climate change partly by tracing the historical development of representations of climate change in the mass media in the British Isles. This provides insights into early connections forged between weather, land use, agriculture and climate. In addition, I will analyze differences in coverage between the “tabloid press” and “quality press”, to consider effects in various cultural, political and economic settings in the UK publics. This presentation will seek to examine “how” media representations have been negotiated through relations of power, and inequalities, thereby influencing a spectrum of possibilities for climate mitigation and adaptation pursuits. Such an exploration is critical to further strengthen a foundation of understanding architectures and actions in environmental governance, particularly as we collectively move into the post-Kyoto climate era.

Amy DAHAN

The IPCC between science and politics

In the climate regime, the scientific and political domains had advanced together, in interaction with one another, even in the absence of a consensus within either of them. The singular institution of IPCC (International Panel of Climate Change) has played an essential role in liaising these domains. The lecture will revisit the principal steps of this co-construction process for a twentieth of years, the specific role of IPCC in the international arenas, and propose some analyses about shifts in this evolution (i.e on adaptation, risks, geopolitical alliances, NGO’s). I’ll try to analyse the reasons due to which the authority of global climate models may be judged as too authoritative within the global governance of the problem.