

Media Coverage of Climate Change

By Don Sutherland

Media coverage concerning climate change has increased during the extreme weather and wildfires that unfolded during summer 2021. The 6th assessment report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that found “unequivocal” evidence that human activities are driving climate change brought an additional measure of coverage.

However, some media outlets are doing better than others when it comes to covering the issue and linking extreme events to climate change. The essential components of climate change-related stories concern what is happening (the events in question), why they are happening (anthropogenic climate change is leading to increased frequency and/or intensity), and who/wat is responsible (leading role of the burning of fossil fuels and the fossil fuel industry). That last component, perhaps because it could create a conflict between the journalistic and advertising sides of media organizations, has seen much less coverage. The implicit defense that it is self-evidence or widely-known falls flat, because polling shows weaker consensus over the specific cause(s) of climate change than broad attribution to human activities. It also falls flat, because reinforcement from repeated coverage can build public pressure to curb greenhouse gas emissions by focusing on the major sources.

As no tool currently exists to evaluate media coverage, I created a simple 3-part rubric to assess such coverage. This rubric draws from the Association of American Colleges & Universities’ information literacy rubric (with permission from the organization). I also provide some examples of proficient or excellent coverage.

The rubric can be found [here](#).