

Balance (Climate & Environment Coverage)

AUTHOR

Daniela Mahl, Lars Guenther

KEYWORDS

coverage on climate change, environmental communication, journalistic norms, balance

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Balance – as a journalistic norm in the domain of climate change reporting – is measured by analyzing both coverage of the debate over anthropogenic contributions to global warming (i.e., the existence of anthropogenic global warming) and coverage of decisions regarding action on global warming (i.e., actions regarding global warming) (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004).

FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Balance is a commonly investigated and internationally agreed-upon journalistic norm that ensures that journalists portray different sides of a story in a neutral and objective way (Westerståhl, 1983). In science reporting, more specifically in reporting on climate change, this journalistic norm can lead to biased reporting in that sense that journalistic coverage does not mirror the scientific understanding (i.e., climate change does exist and action is needed) (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004).

REFERENCES/COMBINATION WITH OTHER

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

There are experimental studies that test the effects of differentially balanced news stories (e.g., Clarke et al., 2014; Dixon & Clarke, 2012), largely confirming that balanced coverage reduces confidence in a scientific consensus and heightens uncertainty of science, risks, etc.

Combination with other methods focus group

discussions with journalists, editors-in-chief and news gatekeepers (Ashorkhani et al., 2012), focus group discussions with consumers of health information (Marshall & Williams, 2006)

EXAMPLE STUDIES

Boykoff & Boykoff (2004); Boykoff (2007); Clarke (2008); Clarke et al. (2014); Dixon & Clarke (2012)

INFORMATION ON BOYKOFF & BOYKOFF, 2004

Authors: Maxwell T. Boykoff & Jules M. Boykoff

Research question: The prevalence of the norm of balance in reporting on climate change and the degree to what this coverage's adherence to balance led to biased coverage of both anthropogenic contributions to global warming (i.e., its existence) and resultant action.

Object of analysis: A sample (636 articles) of the US prestige-press coverage of global warming, i.e., New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal

Time frame of analysis: between 1988 and 2002

INFO ABOUT VARIABLES

Variables:

Two measures of balance:

- (a) Coverage of the debate over anthropogenic contributions to global warming (i.e., existence)
- (b) Coverage of decisions regarding action on global warming (i.e., action)

Level of analysis: news article

Variables and values:

- (a) First measure: Coverage of the debate over anthropogenic contributions to global warming (i.e., existence)

- Article only presents argument that anthropogenic global warming exists, clearly distinct from natural variations



<https://doi.org/10.34778/2o>

© 2021, the authors. This work is licensed under the "Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International" license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

- Article presents both sides, but emphasizes that anthropogenic global warming exists, still distinct from natural variation
 - Article presents a balanced account of debates surrounding existence of anthropogenic global warming
 - Article presents both sides, but emphasizes dubious nature of the claim that anthropogenic global warming exists
- (b) Second measure: Coverage of decisions regarding action on global warming (i.e., action)
- Dominant coverage of decisions/assertions regarding immediate/mandatory action to deal with global warming
 - Balanced accounts of various decisions regarding action
 - Dominant coverage of decisions/assertions regarding cautious/voluntary approaches to deal with global warming

Reliability: Intercoder reliability rate of 93%

Codebook: Table 1 in Boykoff & Boykoff (2004, p. 128)

REFERENCES

- Boykoff, M. T., & Boykoff, J. M. (2004). Balance as bias: Global warming and the US prestige press. *Global Environmental Change* 14, 125-136. doi: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2003.10.001
- Boykoff, M. T. (2007). Flogging a dead norm? Newspaper coverage of anthropogenic climate change in the United States and United Kingdom from 2003 to 2006. *Area* 39(2), 470-481. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-4762.2007.00769.x
- Clarke, C. E. (2008). A question of balance. The autism-vaccine controversy in the British and American elite press. *Science Communication* 30(1), 77-107. doi: 10.1177/1075547008320262
- Clarke, C. E., Dixon, G. N., Holton, A., Weberling McKeever, B. (2014). Including “evidentiary balance” in news media coverage of vaccine risk. *Health Communication* 30(5), 461-472. doi: 10.1080/10410236.2013.867006
- Dixon, G. N., & Clarke, C. E. (2012). Heightening uncertainty around certain science: Media coverage, false balance, and the autism-vaccine controversy. *Science Communication*, 35(3) 358-382. doi: 10.1177/1075547012458290
- Westerståhl, J. (1983). Objective News Reporting General Premises. *Communication Research*, 10(3), 403-424. doi: 10.1177/009365083010003007