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**The Media and the Contradictions in Commitments to the  
Fight against Climate Change**

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**Abstract**

*This paper discusses the media and contradictions in the fight against climate change. It notes that there is widespread agreement on human-induced climate change (anthropogenic climate change) in addition to natural causes. Using results of empirical studies, the paper argues however that the media are succumbing, sometimes unknowingly, to the machinations of opponents of anthropogenic climate change who entice journalists to portray climate change as controversial, complex and uncertain. The media thus risk becoming one of the forces against global efforts to fight climate change given that media coverage shapes public perception, understanding and action. The paper tasks the media to properly scrutinize information, especially disguised views that fuel unnecessary debates and scepticism about climate change. The paper also recommends that the media should be wary of 'objective' reporting which gives equal attention to views of climate change sceptics as well as to proponents of anthropogenic climate change. It*

*recommends that the media should represent a pattern in climate change reporting to help them detect and eschew unnecessary views. The media should as well rely more on interpretative stories (than on news) to help them handle the analysis necessary to put climate change reporting in clear perspective for the audience.*

### **Introduction**

There is no known country in the world where it is believed that climate change is not real. Across the globe the environmental, political and economic challenges posed by climate change are undeniable. Climate change has been described as the defining crisis of the global age (Lester and Cottle, 2009), and it has drawn huge global events. Some of the international events were the recent series of UN-organized conferences in Copenhagen, Denmark (2009), Cancun, Mexico (2010), and Durban, South Africa, (2011), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2012).

During these events, many speeches by world leaders were prefaced by the grim threat posed to humanity by climate change. The leaders also remind everyone that the fight against climate change demands collective action from every stakeholder. World leaders often assure of the readiness of their governments to contribute relentlessly in global efforts to mitigate climate change. However, in reality, what world leaders do (as shown through the media) reflects strident effort to undermine the fight against climate change. Most of what is done consists in brazen contradictions that give a lie to all the talk about global efforts to fight climate change.

There are many political, economic, cultural and technological issues around climate change, which are overshadowing the fact that climate change is a global environmental threat. The overriding issues are: whether or not climate change is occurring, if it is mostly caused by human action, how best to fight it, whether alternative sources of energy would eventually replace fossil fuel, what is the position of some countries on climate change, how strong is the link between greenhouse gases and environmental pollution, will the fight against climate change bring economic prosperity or otherwise? Is climate change fact or fantasy?

Most of these issues are not only diversionary; they also stoke up scepticism in climate change. Yet the media continue to bring them to the fore, raising concerns that the media are chasing shadows while the earth is burning up in global warming. Some have therefore accused the media of being a theatre of

contradictions in climate change reporting. Lester and Cottle (2009) found that across Europe, the media portray climate change as a global threat. Sandell and Blakemore (2006, para6) note that some carbon sceptics entice journalists to refrain from constantly portraying carbon as a major polluter. In 1998, the *New York Times* revealed that opponents of international climate policy had put together a plan with a US\$600,000 budget to recruit scientists "who share the industry's views of climate science and to train them in public relations so they can help convince journalists, politicians, and the public that the risk of global warming is too uncertain to justify controls on greenhouse gases..." (Boykoff & Ravi 2007; Cushman, 1998, p.1). Are the media slowing the race against climate change?

### **Factors Affecting Media Reportage of Climate Change Stories**

Climate reporting is part of science reporting, and it touches a lot on the activities of carbon-based industries, which are very rich and powerful institutions. As a result, there are internal and external factors that impel and constrain the choices of climate change reporters. The important factors in terms of climate change reporting are those determining the focus of textual matter, or contents of whatever is reported (as causes, solutions) in news, feature, and opinion. Among the factors are: the interests/intersection/dynamics of climate science, climate scepticism, policy and carbon-based industries. The second set of factors is expertise, and journalistic norms/ethics (Boykoff and Ravi 2004, 2007, Antilla, 2005).

Various studies have examined the intersection between science, policy and the role of the media in reporting climate change. In all, media portrayals reflect the altercation among carbon industries, scientists/climate researchers, politicians and the media. What is clear though is that science and policy shape media reporting and public understanding. Media coverage of climate change takes place in the larger context of regulatory frameworks, political constraints and economic drivers. "Cultural as well as regional and national differences too contribute to differences in how these interactions take place. All the above factors contribute to the ways in which climate change is communicated via media representations" (Uusi-Rauva & Tienari, 2010, p.2).

### **Intersection of Media, Climate Science/Scepticism and Policy**

In the US and the UK, there is a difference in the ways media have framed climate change. While the media in the UK have accepted the reality of

climate change as a global threat (Lester and Cottle 2009, Weingart P.; Engels A., and Pansegrau P. (2000); Carvalho, 2005, 2007), the US media have allowed climate change doubters to be the primary definers of debate on climate change. First of all, the US media have framed climate change as a debate and as uncertain (Uusi-Rauva and Tienari, 2010; Zehr, 2000; Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004, 2007; Antilla, 2005).

The point at which climate reporting meet with climate science and government policy is heavily politicized, with climate scientists and carbon-based industries trying to outdo one another in using the media to spread views that are often contradictory. This is because of the emergence in the early 1990s of a group of 'climate contrarians', who were often funded by carbon-based industries. This group—also dubbed 'climate sceptics' or the 'carbon club'—have gained significant discursive traction through the media and, as a result, have affected public understanding of the issue (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Gelbspan, 1998). According to Boykoff and Ravi (2007, para8), given the potentially enormous political, social and economic implications of climate change and the strategies to slow or mitigate its potential effects, it comes as no surprise that many individuals and organizations have tried to influence media coverage of the topic.

Experts (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Gelbspan, 1998) believe that the endless attempt to exploit natural resources and to create new products have driven manufacturers, especially multinational companies, to habits that foul the environment. Such habits include scouting for, and exploiting natural resources from far and near to acquire raw materials. In order to sustain their expansionary tendencies, these multinational companies fuel scepticism about climate science such as they do through the mass media. They also deny scientific claims about environmental decline and, more specifically, anthropogenic climate change. That means that frontier/expansionary mindsets and scepticism/contrarianism are two external factors that influence media coverage of climate change especially in the US and the UK.

A study (in Germany on 23 publications from 1975 through 1995) on relations between risk communication and discourses on climate change in science and policy found that there is a lot of disagreement among scientists, policy and the media. "Scientists politicized climate change, politicians reduced the scientific complexities and uncertainties to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions targets, and the media ignored the uncertainties and transformed them into a

sequence of events leading to catastrophe and requiring immediate action” (Weingart et al. 2000, p.280).

A 2010 study of four major national circulation English-language newspapers in India examined "the frames through which climate change is represented in India", and found that "the results strongly contrast with previous studies from developed countries; by framing climate change along a 'risk-responsibility divide', the Indian national press set up a strongly nationalistic position on climate change that divides the issue along both developmental and postcolonial lines" Billett, (2010, pp. 1-16).

A six month study in 1988 on climate change reporting in the media in New Zealand found that 80% of stories were no worse than slightly inaccurate. One story in six stories contained significant misreporting Bell, (1994).

Furthermore, journalistic norms themselves have affected the content of news stories on climate change, sometimes to the impediment of improved communication between climate science and policy (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007). These norms such as 'objectivity', 'neutrality', 'impartiality' and 'balance' emerged as standards of professional journalism from the twentieth century. The great American writer and journalist Walter Lippman pushed for the development and use of such standards and norms (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Carey, 1989, p.23).

In reporting news, (especially in developing countries) journalists emphasize balance and fairness. However, climate change is not just an issue with two sides, which should be given equal attention (Entman, 1993, p.51). Media researchers believe that balance is often "a surrogate for validity checks", because "the typical journalist, even one trained as a science writer, has neither the time nor the expertise to check the validity of claims" (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992, p.199). Mooney (2004, para12) notes that “this can in fact lead to lopsided reporting if the article gives too much space and attention to views held by only an insignificant minority of the scientific community”.

Reinforcing the views of other researchers, Boykoff and Ravi (2007, para6) argue that inserting scientific uncertainty into the discourse raises the perception of debate (Zehr, 2000; Wilkins, 1993), despite the fact that the vast majority of scientists support the claim that we are witnessing a rapid change in global weather patterns. This has important repercussions on public policy: if the process of media framing (whereby the bounds of discourse and meanings are constructed and reinforced) confuses rather than clarifies

scientific understanding, it creates opportunities for policy makers to evade responsibility and delay action.

In addition, journalists often tell stories based on human interest and controversy to attract attention. According to Shoemaker and Reese, (1996),

Controversy is one of the main variables affecting story choice among news editors, along with human interest, prominence, timeliness, celebrity, and proximity. But controversy raises editorial issues, such as, what is the fairest way to report such hotly disputed versions of reality to an audience? The culture of political journalism has long used the notion of balanced coverage. In this construct, it is permissible to air a highly partisan opinion, provided this view is accompanied by a competing opinion. But recently scientists and scholars have challenged the legitimacy of this journalistic core value (p. 261).

In politics, balanced reporting may be appropriate for portraying the manifestoes of parties and contestants. Schneider, (2005, para 8), in contrast, writes: “In science, it’s different. Extreme examples bring this point home. Does a flat-earth proponent deserve equal time to a modern astrophysicist? Following this logic, some experts argue that it is misleading to give scientific mavericks or advocates equal time with established mainstream scientists”.

In a survey of 636 articles from four top United States newspapers between 1988 and 2002, Boykoff &. Boykoff, (2004) found that most articles gave as much time to the small group of climate change doubters as to the scientific consensus view. Some scholars thus argue that given the real consensus among climatologists over global warming, many scientists find the media’s desire to portray the topic as a scientific controversy to be a gross distortion. As Stephen Schneider (2005) put it: “a mainstream, well-established consensus may be ‘balanced’ against the opposing views of a few extremists, and to the uninformed, each position seems equally credible.” Boyce Rensberger, former director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Knight Center for Science Journalism once remarked: “balanced coverage of science does not mean giving equal weight to both sides of an argument. It means apportioning weight according to the balance of evidence.”

### **Media as Accomplices in Stoking Climate Change Scepticism**

Many media firms worldwide have adopted definite patterns of reporting climate change especially in a way to defend the interests of their governments, countries and even carbon-based industries. The major aims of various mass media have been:

- to subjectively determine images of climate change to portray in the media to influence public understanding/knowledge as well as government policies on climate change
- to ensure that they protect their country's interests in the global discourses on climate change in areas such as solutions to climate change, aid/funding, emission cuts vs. economic considerations, climate change adaptation, and
- submissions to make during climate change talks/conferences.

Most media firms however hardly deny the reality of climate change since they are aware of scientific evidence to the contrary. But they (the media) give voice to the views of climate sceptics who raise questions about the link between greenhouse gas emission and climate change. The media at times proffer solutions that will not address more emission of carbon when they talk about aid to developing countries, carbon credits and carbon tax. Worse, they frame climate change as uncertain, complex, difficult to tackle, and requiring solutions that will severely affect the world economy.

The media drove the wheels of social discussions in the run up to the 2009 climate change conference in Copenhagen. The international media (*BBC World, CNN*, etc.), as observed by these writers, focused attention on the political and economic issues around climate change, even more than the environmental implications. The areas include: the politics of attendance, emission cut targets, reaching binding agreements, and economic issues such as the impact of carbon cuts on industrial outputs and economic expansion of countries, and the likely effects on election bids of politicians and parties. Many world leaders were reluctant to agree to emission cut targets because of domestic pressure. They feared losing the next election. Media predictions came true when no agreement was reached in Copenhagen on any of the measures to fight climate change, especially reaching binding agreements on emission cut targets.

The media again began setting the tone of the 2010 UN climate change conference in Cancun, Mexico one month ahead of the conference. *Al*

*Jazeera* news of November 6, 2010 viewed the Conference as a hopeless situation that was not expected to yield any binding agreements. The station, shortly after making the comment, showed the wind-driven electric power field in Texas for electricity generation, (the largest in the world, producing 2,370 megawatts, enough to power 600,000 average sized homes a year) and noted that its owners insist that the chief aim of the station was profit, not the fight against climate change. It appeared that the station was helping the owners of the power field in voicing their opposition to beliefs in human-induced climate change. Boykoff and Ravi (2007, para9) have observed that lack of belief in climate change has been fuelled by media portrayals of climate change in the US, which in turn has affected government policy on climate change.

In an interview with the secretary of the 2010 Cancun climate change talks, Ms. Christiana Figueres, *Al Jazeera TV* (in its *Talk to Al Jazeera*) in February 2012 dealt with the climate change subject as though it were controversial, complex and intractable. The presenter constantly posed questions to reflect the difficulty of tackling climate change. Questions were preceded by statements such as: given that we have a media that is not ready to dig deep into the process of climate change .....; in view of the radical measures proposed by the IPCC on cutting carbon emission, why do you think the measures are a win-win situation and not a way to kill off the oil industry; given the emission cut targets of the United Nations Framework Conference on Climate Change (UNFCCC) do we have enough renewable energy resource base to cope with the growing demand on energy; is there enough capacity in renewable energy technology to cope with the growing demand on energy if we cut down on fossil fuel to the level canvassed by the UNFCCC? At a point, the presenter portrayed climate change as contentious, intricate, and that global warming itself was confusing.

The presenter left Ms. Figueres with the burden of first dealing with his (the presenter's) negative views on issues, as well as the burden of finding satisfactory answers. Ms. Figueres was however brilliant on the night when she proved that reducing carbon emission would be a 'win-win' situation because it would guarantee the safety and survival of humanity as well as assure more development and job creation that would follow from newer and greener technology, without necessarily halting oil production in the interim.

CNN on Tuesday, November 30, 2012, three hours before landfall of Hurricane Sandy, used experts to analyze the severity of the on-coming

storm, warning citizens to take all precautions as given by the media and weather experts. Experts that appeared on the news at 19:00 GMT gave horrifying details of what may be the size of the hurricane (160km wide, 9.9 feet high, 60 million people \*threatened, power cuts, likely to merge with a cold front and become a super storm). The news presenter seemingly (she was actually arguing against anthropogenic climate) felt that the explanations were too frightening and asked the question: can we link all these to climate change? The expert answered: not really climate change, but climate shift. The expert also added: we are likely to start talking about climate shift in the future instead of climate change. Curious? What the expert did was to deflate the arguments of those already arguing that the storm was caused by climate change. He also implied that the term climate change was incorrect, perhaps non-existent.

Similarly, the world media and some Nigerian media organisations handled issues surrounding the 2007 IPCC report in ways that could unduly affect public perception of climate change. A 2010 study concluded that mass media in the US continue to suggest that scientific consensus estimates of global climate disruption, such as those from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), are 'exaggerated' and overly pessimistic (Freudenburg, & Muselli, 2010).

One story in the Nigerian *Thisday* newspaper, Thursday, September 2, 2010, p.34, raised questions about the truth of climate change. The story (entitled **Climate change: UN welcomes independent preview**) had every guise of the handiwork of climate change doubters. The fact that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was summoned by the UN, which demanded a review of the IPCC report (as a result of alleged mistakes), could call up questions in the mind of readers. The said IPCC report was the 2007 landmark fourth assessment report, which found the warming of climate outpacing natural variability, propelled principally by human activity. The question could have been: if the IPCC makes such errors (as the UN alleged), how are we sure that climate change is really occurring, and a result of human actions? But the IPCC insisted that the glaciers were melting, and the greenhouse gas link remained ever strong.

The same story also appeared in the Nigerian *Vanguard* newspaper, Tuesday, May 18, 2010, p.34, (with the headline: **Review of inter governmental panel on climate change begins**) but it was written in a way that did not call human-induced climate change into question. The *Thisday* story, in contrast,

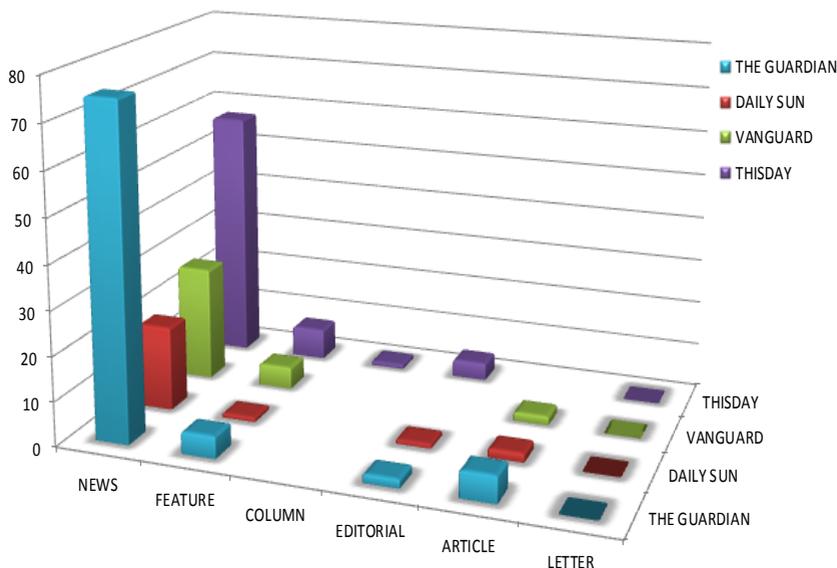
reported that the credibility of IPCC came into question after “revelation that the report contained some mistakes including over the rate of Himalayan glacier melt”. It appeared that the credibility in question was all about the truth of climate change.

Sometimes, news sources take advantage of unsuspecting/ill-informed journalists to provide information in ways that will serve ulterior, predetermined motives. For instance, the story in *Thisday* was news. If it had been an article or column, those projecting the story in the UN (who were possibly climate sceptics) would have had the opportunity to argue their side of the debate on causes of climate change. It was likely too that the reporter did not see the angle of climate scepticism to the story. If they did, they would have sought expert views outside the UN in the story to strengthen the belief or non-belief in the truth of human-induced climate change.

The quotes in the story, instead, were within the confines of UN officials’ statements, one of which was that the IPCC should “strengthen its procedures to handle ever-larger and increasingly complex climate assessments as well as the more intense public scrutiny coming from a world grappling with how best to respond to climate change – Robbert Dijkgraaf, co-chair of the InterAcademy Council (IAC) and head of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Science. Again, the question is: what does Robbert mean by: ‘increasingly complex climate assessments, and more intense public scrutiny’? Perhaps he wanted the readers to see climate change as difficult to understand and to believe that the public was scrutinizing information about the truth of (IPCC’s report on) climate change.

Ukonu (2012) found that Nigerian newspapers were not able to detect the high level inconsistencies in the utterances of world leaders with regard to commitments on reaching a binding global treaty on climate change. The study was an analysis of Nigerian newspaper reportage of climate change. Out of the 213 stories analysed in four newspapers (*The Guardian, Thisday, Vanguard and Daily Sun*), 177 (83.1%) were news. Ukonu concluded that because the newspapers were only reporting events, they could not plan their reporting (figure 1). They could not put issues in context, and they could not detect the contradictions and inconsistencies in the ways world leaders were handling issues regarding reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

**Figure 1: Story Genre**



According to the study, stories on the international arena were dominated by the US and China, who were not ready to commit to emission cuts, and kept on pointing accusing fingers at each other. Outside conferences, the countries kept talking about their commitment to emission cuts, but never showed action to support their words during conferences. In a story in *The Guardian* (Monday January 18, 2010, p. 35), entitled **Investors Urge governments to take immediate action on climate change**, US, European and Australian investors said: “we cannot wait for a global treaty” to act. But they were not interested in a global treaty on meaningful emission cut as demonstrated in a story in *Thisday*, Sunday, November 29, 2009, p.20, entitled **US, EU**

### **Prepare for Climate Summit**

According to the newspaper, “A summit of leaders from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, including Mr. Obama earlier this month, dropped plans to reach a binding agreement in Copenhagen”. This tone was re-echoed in a story captioned: **Climate deal unlikely this year; says UK,**

**EU ministers**, *The Guardian*, Monday, November 9, 2009, p. 35. In a story in the *Daily Sun*, Friday, December 18, 2009 entitled **New Climate Deal to wait until 2012**, “the Danish presidency of the climate summit in Copenhagen dropped hopes that a deal would be brokered in Copenhagen”. On Tuesday, December 8, 2009, P. 3, *Thisday*, reported in a headline: **Climate Change: World Leaders Hopeful of Resolution**.

In *The Guardian*, Tuesday October 19, 2010, the Ethiopia Prime Minister, Zenawi Meles summarized the attitude of developed nations: “The political leaders are not ready to take risks on climate change issues. You have all sorts of strange opinions among the most advanced countries of the world. Their basic interests thrive in an atmosphere of parochialism”. Writing with the headline, **Anan optimistic about climate pact prospects**, *The Guardian*, Wednesday, June 24, 2009, p. 10, reported that Kofi Anan, former UN secretary general, expressed hopes that the then forthcoming Copenhagen talks would lead to a deal with the support of the US. But in *The Guardian*, Monday October, 18, 2010, p. 23, it was noted that the US and a few other countries spearheaded the Copenhagen Accord in line with their desire to avoid a binding treaty on emission cut targets.

Therefore, developed countries were inconsistent in their utterances and actions. There were talks about commitments to emission cuts yet world leaders had decided not to agree to emission cuts? The story in *Thisday*, Sunday, November 29, 2009, p.20 was written as if it were an editorial when the writer made an unattributed, nay, weighty comment within straight news: “while the summit isn’t expected to produce a legally binding agreement, Mr Obama’s decision to attend ratchets up pressure on his administration to narrow differences with other nations over how to distribute the costs of cutting emission....” A week later when the Copenhagen conference began, the same newspaper did another news story expressing hopes of a binding agreement at the talks as follows: “The Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen... raised the hope of the participants; saying ‘a deal is within our reach’” *Thisday*, Tuesday, December 8, 2009, p. 3. And just two weeks after, the same *Thisday*, Tuesday, December 22, 2009, p. 52, in a story: **China to Blame for Copenhagen Failure**, reported that the UK Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Ed Miliband, blamed China for vetoing moves to give legal force to the climate change accord and blocked an agreement on global reduction in greenhouse emission.

## **Conclusion**

As shown above, developed nations always expressed hopes about reaching a treaty as conferences approached, yet they impeded efforts to reach binding deals during conferences. Newspapers, unfortunately, failed to notice the laughable contradictions. This was because they used straight news as the major genre for reporting climate change, and it was difficult to put issues in perspective or to track the whole context within which climate change events and talks were occurring. This was also why, as demonstrated in Ukonu (2012), the four newspapers reported 93 cases in which developed nations made promises to African leaders on funding to fight climate change, and not one case in which promised funds were disbursed.

## **Recommendations**

In view of the discussions so far, the following recommendations are presented.

1. Reporters should use lots of non-news in reporting climate change to offer them the opportunity to drive debate and guide opinion on climate change. Even when the media are constrained to report only news stories, journalists can ask questions based on issues they want to present to their audience according to the patterns or images they want to represent.
2. The media should do well to represent a pattern in terms frames, construction and images to project based on topics, angles and policy issues. The aim should be to clarify confusing issues instead of hiding under the cloak of objectivity to portray opposing views that confound, instead of clarify, the truth.
3. Opinion polls are necessary to see where audience interests lie as well as how much newspaper views influence public understanding in terms of communication effectiveness. "Responsible citizenry necessitates a concrete knowledge of causes and until, for example, the public understands what causes climate change it cannot be expected to take voluntary action to mitigate its effects" (Board, O'Connor & Fisher, 2000).
4. The media should build climate information system (CIS) that would help them know what kind of topics to allow, and where to

seek stories as well as put in perspective the whole context within which climate change discussions occur.

5. Reporters should cultivate sufficient local sources to help them get more local stories, especially on research and adaptation measures. More importantly, reporters should learn about the environmental legal framework in their environments, to help them cultivate environmental sources and know what to expect from various stakeholders in environmental issues. They can even suggest amendments to the legal framework from time to time.
6. In view of the stories that had appearances of climate scepticism seen in *Thisday*, Thursday, September 2, 2010, p.34, and *The Guardian*, Monday January 18 2010, p. 39, the carbon clubs may just be starting a campaign to rouse climate contrarianism in climate reporting in Nigerian newspapers. Thus, the media must be on their guard against stories introducing unnecessary debates about the truth and falsity of climate change, even under various guises.
7. Climate change information should not be presented as hard, complex scientific information. Reporters should demonstrate belief in the fact that climate change can be mitigated.
8. Reporters should conduct more public opinion polls about climate change and run the results as stories. This will not only help reporters gauge public opinion on climate change, and thereby direct choice of topics, it will also give the public a sense of belonging in the scheme of choice of issues discussed about climate change. Those whose views are sampled will definitely want to read their views in newspapers, and also talk more about climate change.

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