

Blowing hot and cold? A quantitative content analysis of climate change coverage on Belgian news sites

The goal of this paper is to study, by means of a large-scale content analysis, how climate change is covered in Belgian online news media in terms of the focus (specific events or the long-term process), the sources consulted, and journalistic role performance.

First, climate change is one of the most challenging topics in journalism. Climate change is a complex, long-term development, with invisible causes, indirect impacts and consequences in the long run (Moser, 2010). While the praxis of news selection favors concrete and remarkable events, climate change in itself is more unobtrusive and less tangible (Cox, 2010). Previous research on the effect of thematic (broader context, on a more abstract level) versus episodic (specific case study, event related) coverage has demonstrated that the thematic approach of climate change is more likely to induce awareness on the importance of a global change in policy and societal norms to tackle the presented challenges (Gross, 2008; Hart, 2011). Yet, especially in online news media, where immediacy is an important factor in the news cycle (Buhl et al., 2018), it can be hypothesized that an unobtrusive development as climate change will be mainly covered when specific events occur (i.e. episodic coverage).

Second, the public debate on climate change tends to be polarized (Bolsen, 2018; Chinn et al., 2020), implying that journalists should be even more considerate about the sources they contact and the actors they include. It can be argued that especially in online media this polarization is notable. As traditional news media tend to appeal to a large audience share, digital-only news sites are more concerned with trying to stand out in an ever growing range of news sites and platforms (Wilson et al., 2020). As a result, digital-only news sites tend to display a more distinct political and commercial orientation, compared to traditional news media (Nygaard, 2019). However, previous research on climate change coverage tends to focus mainly on print newspapers (e.g. Bohr, 2020; Dotson et al., 2012; Keller et al., 2020), leaving the broader range of viewpoints in online news sites underexposed (Moernaut et al., 2018).

Third, the choices made in producing a news item on climate are also apparent in the performance of a journalistic role (Mellado, 2015; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). It can be argued that especially in an agitated topic such as the debate on climate change the role(s) a journalist adheres to will have a substantial impact on how the news is covered. Mellado et al. (2018) found that the audience orientation of a news medium is an important determinant of journalistic role performance. It can thus be hypothesized that the prevalence of journalistic roles will vary widely between online news sites with different and outspoken orientations.

Considering the lack of research on online news media, and the assumed differences as compared to newspapers, a quantitative content analysis will be conducted on five Belgian news sites: VRTNWS.be (the news site of the public broadcaster), HLN.be and Standaard.be (news sites of a tabloid and a broadsheet newspaper, respectively), and Doorbraak.be and Dewereidmorgen.be (digital-only news sites with a conservative and a progressive signature, respectively). The time frame is a 30 month period starting at September 2018 (the 'Skolstrejk för klimatet' -school strike for climate- by Greta Thunberg started by the end of August 2018) until February 2021. The total sample consists of 750 news items. In addition to some general variables (e.g. item length and presence of visuals), we will study the trigger of the item (episodic versus thematic), the sources and actors mentioned in the item, and journalistic role performance.

The coding of the news items and the analysis of the data will take place from March-June 2021. The research design allows to compare different types of online news media in the way they cover climate change. Moreover, the differences in journalistic role performance can be linked to the content choices made, adding to the knowledge of both the field of environmental communication and the field of journalistic roles.

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