EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2000 the elite U.S. media have radically changed their approach to reporting global warming. This study compares newspaper coverage of global warming in the United States with that in other countries. While in 2000 only 43% of articles in the New York Times claimed that global warming is caused by human activity, in 2006 over 96% held that stance. Adopting the “consensus” viewpoint has resulted in (a) media self-censorship and ridicule of alternative positions, (b) the loss of press objectivity, (c) the failure to discuss viable alternatives that promote economic growth, and (d) policies that discourage industry and competitiveness.

Keywords: Media Coverage, Global Warming, Press Objectivity, Policymaking, Industry, Competitiveness

INTRODUCTION

In June 2000 Ross Gelbspan declared, “Over the last seven years, the fossil fuel lobby has mounted an extremely effective campaign of disinformation to persuade the public and policy-makers that the issue of atmospheric warming is still stuck in the limbo of scientific uncertainty. That campaign for the longest time targeted the science. It then misrepresented the economics. And most recently it attacked the diplomatic foundations of the climate convention. And it has been extraordinarily successful in creating a relentless drumbeat of doubt in the public mind.”

A lot has changed since the turn of the millennium. In the past seven years, since Gelbspan’s declaration, advocates of global warming have won over the press and a majority of the public to what is now described as the consensus view (Matthews, 2005; Begley, 2007). Global warming skeptics not only are not listened to; they are considered lunatics and are ridiculed. In August 2007, Newsweek ran a cover story by Sharon Begley that was meant to debunk the myth of an alternative viewpoint once and for all, so that society can get on to finding solutions to man-made climate change. Instead, the result was a plethora of stories in the alternative press “debunking the debunkers” (Marano, 2007; Sheppard, 2007). The next week even Newsweek ran a rebuttal (Samuelson, 2007) claiming that “self-righteous indignation can undermine good journalism” and “viewing the world as ‘good guys vs. bad guys’ can lead to a vast oversimplification of a messy story.” Newsweek had gotten its facts wrong on a number of counts and proposed a solution that was simplistic at best.

This paper examines news coverage in two newspapers in 2006 and proposes that Newsweek is not alone in its one-sided coverage of global warming. Reporters have adopted a view that, like the dangers of smoking, global warming is a reality caused by human consumption and something must be done. Alternative viewpoints are no longer sought nor listened to.

However, a consensus doesn’t exist. A recent study by Dr. Klaus-Martin Schulte (Asher, 2007) of 528 global warming papers puts the number of studies explicitly endorsing the consensus view at only seven percent. When combined with studies that implicitly accept global warming the figure rises to 45%; however, the largest group of studies are neutral (48%), neither accepting or rejecting the hypothesis. Six percent reject global warming outright. This study and a similar one by Peiser (2005) rebutted earlier claims by historian Naomi Oreskes (2004) showing “an unanimous, scientific consensus on the anthropogenic causes of recent global warming.”

The lack of impartiality in media coverage is potentially dangerous. Closure of the press debate on global warming will lead a failure to discuss viable alternatives that might promote economic growth, and policies that discourage industry and competitiveness.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Reporting of science is problematic. Science draws from many sources with multiple versions of knowledge and is often tentative and inconclusive. On-the-other-hand, journalists seek to clarify and provide certainty. Journalists transform “provisional findings into certain findings,” often exaggerating the scientific claims and downplaying the qualifiers and caveats from the original journal articles. The result is a story that may appear more certain to the public than the data do to scientists (Stocking, 1999).

Journalistic practices of trying to achieve objectivity by drawing from two opposing points of view may actually add to the uncertainty. By drawing opinions from all sides, reporters give equal weight to majority scientists and fringe scientists and to scientists and non-scientists. Drawing information from opposite viewpoints also meets demands for novelty and significance. Journalists seek out stories that defy conventional scientific wisdom knowing that “contrarian stories are novel and therefore newsworthy” (Stocking, 1999).

Ross Gelbspan (1998, pp. 57-58) has asserted, “The professional canon of journalistic fairness requires reporters who write about a controversy to present competing points of view. When the issue is of a political or social nature, fairness – presenting the most compelling arguments of both sides with equal weight – is a fundamental check on biased reporting. But this canon causes problems when it is applied to issue of science. It seems to demand that journalists present competing points of views on a scientific question as though they had equal scientific weight, when actually they do not.” Striving for objectivity and balance may contribute to uncertainty.

Corbett and Durfee (2004) claim that the level of uncertainty about global warming coverage has increased as politicians and interest groups have replaced scientists as the primary sources for information. The best way of assuring certainty is to put the story in its context, rather than reporting controversy. The various accounts “make it appear to readers that scientists are much more uncertain than they actually are about whether global warming is occurring” (Zehr, 1999, pp. 10-11).

Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) examined coverage of global warming from 1988 to 2002 in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and the Wall Street Journal. They found that the norm of balanced reporting provided a biased view of global warming. Because journalists provided both sides of global warming story, the authors suggested that the newspapers kept alive the impression that the reality of global warming was still in question.

Dispensa and Brulle (2003) found that coverage for the year 2000 in the Washington Post and New York Times showed a higher percentage of stories against or giving both sides than did papers in Finland and New Zealand. The New York Times carried 37 stories on global warming; 16 supporting, 6 against, and 15 both; the Washington Post carried 34 stories, 13 supporting, 5 against, and 16 both; the Helsingin Sanomat carried 7 stories, all supporting the global warming; and the New Zealand Herald carried 45 stories, 40 supporting the theory, one against and 4 with both sides. The reason they postulated was that the U.S. has a fossil fuel driven economy; New Zealand and Finland do not.

Nisbet and Huge (2006) reviewed how attention cycles and frames influence a scientific debate. By controlling media attention and framing an issue in favorable terms interest groups have a potential for influencing policy making. News coverage follows the “issue attention cycle” proposed by Downs (1972). An issue rests in a pre-problem stage until a traumatic event “catapults” it to the public attention. The rise in attention then leads to pressure on the political system to solve the problem. It remains in the policy domain even after the initial attention diminishes. As long as changes occur incrementally, little attention is paid to the issue, but when something dramatic occurs press coverage increases and public pressure is applied on policy makers.

**Diffusion of Innovation**

Journalists exert influence on each other. Journalists often gain their knowledge of events and issues from other journalists through reading and listening to the media. Although journalists may take an attitude of neutral observer, they at some point must also adopt ideas or innovations. Ryan and Gross (1943) proposed adopters in terms of five categories: (1) innovators
(2.5%), (2) early adopters (13.5%), (3) early majority (34%), (4) late majority (34%), and (5) laggards (16%). Rogers (2003) enlarged on these categories by defining their application. The notion of adoption is described as diffusion of innovation.

Media channels are usually the most effective way of making adopters aware of an issue. However, it is usually through interpersonal contact that people are persuaded. While mass media channels are relatively more important at the knowledge stage, interpersonal channels are more important at the persuasion stage in the innovation-decision process. Similarly, the mass media are more important than interpersonal channels for earlier adopters than for later adopters (Rogers, 2003).

Adoption of ideas or innovations follow an S-curve first observed in 1903 by the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde who plotted the original S-shaped diffusion curve. Innovators and early adopters are shown at the bottom of the S-curve while laggards are at the top of the curve. Although numerous studies have been done of the public as adopters, little is known about journalists and their patterns of adoption. Their patterns are likely similar, with some possible variations related to the nature of the journalistic trade. Journalistic adoption of global warming would likely fit this pattern.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Casual observation suggests that the mainstream U.S. media no longer give coverage to alternative viewpoints about global warming. It appears that they have accepted the “consensus” perspective and in so doing don’t give credence to scientists or lay people who hold to other views. The news media’s adoption of the “consensus” may be leading to a similar viewpoint among the general population. There is less uncertainty among the media and the public about climate change. This is reflected in Newsweek polls (Begley, 2007). Last year 64 percent of Americans thought there was “a lot” of scientific disagreement on climate change. A 2007 poll found that 39 percent say there is “a lot of disagreement among climate scientists.” These assumptions led to two hypotheses:

1. The majority of press coverage supports the view that global warming is caused by man-made CO2 emissions, sustaining the idea of diffusion of innovation among the news media.
2. When diffusion of innovation is achieved among journalists, the rules of balance and impartiality are no longer followed.

METHODOLOGY

Dispensa and Brulle (2003) selected two countries, Finland and New Zealand, for comparison to the United States. This study compares coverage in Canada’s Globe and Mail with the New York Times in the United States. They used the CIA’s World Fact Book 2002 to compare the countries in terms of economies, major industries, environmental issues and media coverage. Canada which has about 1/10 the population of the United States, partly because of its geographic location to the U.S. has similar economies, industries, environmental issues and media coverage. Both have major fossil fuel industries.

This study followed the Dispensa and Brulle approach in using the key words, “global warming,” to search web sites for the New York Times and for the Toronto Globe and Mail. The search identified 146 stories containing the words “global warming” in the New York Times and 533 articles in the Globe and Mail during a year beginning from the fall 2005 to fall 2006. Key words like “climate change” were not examined.

In the Dispensa and Brulle study, articles were separated into three categories based upon at least one sentence mentioning global warming as either supporting or against the assertion that “global warming is anthropogenically produced and occurring.” Sometimes this assertion was made specifically while other times it was only implied. The “both” category identified articles that contained both supportive and unsupportive lines of text. This study examined the lead few paragraphs to determine whether the articles fit into Dispensa and Brulle’s categories.
RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1 below shows the number of articles in the 2006 New York Times and Toronto Globe and Mail and compares these with New York Times coverage from 2000 as reported by Dispensa and Brulle (2003). An overwhelming majority of the articles from the New York Times (94%) and the Globe and Mail (96%) were identified as supporting global warming. No articles were found to be against and only a small proportion, often industry-based, reported both. The number of articles about global warming in the New York Times was almost four times greater in 2006 than in 2000. The number of articles in the Globe and Mail during 2006 was almost four times (actually 3.6 times) greater than in the New York Times during the same year.

**TABLE 1: 2006 NEWSPAPER COVERAGE COMPARED TO 2000**

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<th>Support</th>
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<th>Both</th>
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<tr>
<td>2006 New York Times</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>146</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000 New York Times</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 Globe and Mail</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>533</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>96%</td>
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Whereas Dispensa and Brulle (2003) found that a high number of reports were either against global warming or reported both sides, this study suggests that current coverage is almost entirely supportive with few attempts to cover both sides. The media is reporting a clear message of certainty that global warming is a reality and is caused by man-made emissions of CO2. It appears that both hypotheses are supported by the findings from the study.

First, since the majority of coverage supports global warming, it may be possible to claim that the news media have adopted this idea and diffusion has occurred. Content analysis appears to be a good tool in determining the degree of diffusion of innovation. This study, however, is limited by the fact that it examined only two newspapers, both elite papers serving national and large urban populations. To be more definite in making this claim a more comprehensive examination of media from a variety of markets would be necessary, particularly those serving industrial and oil producing communities. Further, it would be helpful to survey and interview journalists as to their views.

The second hypothesis is also supported. It would appear that when diffusion of innovation is achieved the rules of balance and impartiality are no longer followed by journalists. This study would be enhanced by looking more in-depth at the stories about global warming. In an earlier study I distinguished between news and opinion pieces and examined their impact on the policy making process (Fisher, 1991). These tools could be used in studying this issue in regards to diffusion of innovation.

The fact that Canadian coverage was almost four times greater than that in the United States perhaps reflects the greater importance Canadians may give to the global warming issue. Also, environmental issues have been a more important part of the political agenda over a longer period in Canada. Although not demonstrated in the kind of coverage, it also may result from a continuing strong viewpoint against man-made global warming in the United States. The U.S. findings after six years are now much more in line with those in Finland and New Zealand, where coverage in 2000 was mainly supporting global warming.
CONCLUSIONS

This study was limited to only two publications during one year. Generalization is not possible to other media organizations or the journalism profession as a whole. However, if this examination of the New York Times and Globe and Mail is any indication of the larger trend within the media, journalists seem to have accepted global warming as a reality. No longer are journalists seeking balance or alternative viewpoints in their reporting. Articles are supportive of the global warming phenomenon and ignore other perspectives. From Boykoff and Boykoff’s (2004) point of view this would mean reporting is less biased, because it no longer gives credence to minority viewpoints. Newspapers no longer are keeping alive the impression that the reality of global warming is still in question.

However, if the question of the cause of global warming is still in doubt, journalists are doing a disfavor to industry and the public by not reporting alternative viewpoints. When journalists become adopters of a viewpoint, they no longer are neutral observers and simply reporters of events. As this study suggests this would be the case for the editors and reporters of the New York Times and Globe and Mail. When they accept an idea or innovation, no longer are they simply bystanders reporting both sides of an issue, but they have become players with a stake in the event.

Because his study doesn’t address how broad is acceptance of “global warming” by the media, further study is needed to determine how wide-spread the view is among news organizations. Also, it is possible that the New York Times and Globe and Mail might be early adopters rather than representative of all media in the diffusion of innovation. In addition, it would be worthwhile studying the media adoption pattern as it relates to the general public. If the media are agenda setters for what the public discuss and think about, one would suppose that editors, news directors and reporters would be among earlier adopters. However, it is also possible that the media adopt innovations only after public opinion reaches a certain acceptance level. In that case, the media would follow public opinion rather than establishing people’s views. In either case, the media seem to play a role in bringing public opinion to the point of acceptance.

An additional research question might consider the rate of acceptance of the popular paradigm among corporate America. Is corporate America slower to adopt an idea such as global warming than the media and the general public? At what point would they accept a viewpoint even if it is contrary to their interests?

It seems clear that in adopting a certain viewpoint (or frame) the news media become advocates for that position. If the media have adopted the position that global warming is man-made, then they no longer can be trusted to report objectively on the issue of climate change. Industry and the public should be wary of the media message about global warming, which Lindzen (2006) describes as alarmist. Under pressure, business and government are being pushed to make decisions that may affect the long term competitiveness and economic well-being of the world. Industry needs to make decisions based on balanced information, not on pressure by politicians, interest groups or the media. It is important that all sides of the global warming issue be reported.

REFERENCES


