

Public Communication of Climate Change

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Conference “Challenges of climate change – global and local strategies to save the planet”
Warsaw, Poland, 19-20 April 2007

Summary

Based on a study of public communication of climate change in Germany which included a media analysis, surveys of experts and journalists interacting with each other in the course of media reporting, and a reception analysis looking into the processes of sense-making of media information on climate change by the media audience, the talk describes the public image of climate change in Germany and the role of science in shaping this image.* Furthermore, some theses about the possible role of the media in coping with the climate change risk are outlined. The talk focuses on mass media and the national level of communication.

- Since at least 2002 the German media report on global climate change largely in accordance with the mainstream position of the climate change research community: (1) Climate change is seen as real and as a serious risk. A large spectrum of negative consequences is mentioned, e.g. melting of the ice shield, raising sea level, floodings, extreme weather events and risks for agricultural productivity. (2) The media largely support the mainstream hypothesis of man-made activities (emission of greenhouse gases) as the major cause of climate change. (3) Measures to cope with climate change are heavily reported and generally supported. The media focus on mitigation (particularly the international Convention on Climate Change and related discussions) and neglect the discussion of adaptation measures, however. (4) Responsibility for climate change – if mentioned at all – is attributed to industrialized countries and our energy-wasting lifestyle. Thus every member of the audience is implicitly assigned responsibility as a risk producer.
- Science and politics/administration are the most often mentioned “discourse actors” in the coverage of global climate change, meaning that primarily their perceptions, opinions or demands are used to create the media image of climate change. NGOs and industry are much less influential. Scientific sources succeeded over the years in getting their warning into the public. They adapted astonishingly well to the demands of the media and accepted a political role in that they were not just a source of scientific knowledge, but also combined knowledge with political assessments and demands.
- Large majorities of experts quoted in the media, of journalists reporting about climate change and of the general population share the concern about climate change. However, there are some differences in detail: Journalists, for example, are somewhat more cautious than the experts regarding definite statements and show some professional distance to their sources. The general public is more convinced than the experts that climate change can still be prevented but has less confidence than experts that its consequences could be managed in Germany.
- Rather than considering the media as an “information channel” it is more appropriate to look at them as a system of meaning production. Mass media content in

* The full report of the study is available online: <http://hdl.handle.net/2128/460> (in German).

newspapers, radio, television, and media organizations' websites derives from journalistic "observation" and is constructed according to a "media logic" that consists of rules of selection and framing. The main challenge for journalism is raising attention by creating "relevance" for a general audience. Some features of the specific journalistic approach of meaning production are (1) a focus on what is new and surprising, (2) linkages to the everyday world of recipients, (3) creation of cognitive and/or affective involvement (reference to needs and threats, suspense), (4) storytelling rather than describing facts and (5) use of "frames" that are well-known to the audience (e.g. the earth as a "patient" or disasters as "revenge" of nature).

- Many organizations and individuals think of the media as an "instrument" they can use to pursue their persuasive goals. While it is true that the media depend heavily on inputs from social actors and individuals (e.g. politics, industry, science, NGOs etc.) they nevertheless follow their own logic. And that logic will often make it difficult or impossible to exploit the media – even for goals that are in the public welfare. Moral appeals to journalism pleading to support "good" social marketing goals are usually useless. The main consequence is that communicators who want their views represented in the public have to adapt to the media logic.
- *Public education:* In issues like climate change the general population relies on mass media as the default information source. Surveys as well as our media reception study show that in the case of global climate change the German media audience more or less agrees with the media image of climate change. The big question is: Does the general population change its behavior in order to protect the climate? In surveys respondents indeed express their intentions for certain behavioral changes. So they know they "should" change their behavior. But will they? I am pessimistic about long-term behavioral changes of a large part of the population based on problem awareness created by the media. Although the population is concerned about the climate change risk, the climate change issue lacks some characteristics that motivates people in other risk issues: (1) the threat is not immediate and personal, (2) individual behavioral changes do not lead to personal advantages, (3) the emotional appeal is rather low because the risk is perceived as caused by the affected themselves. "Business as usual" combined with a somewhat bad conscience and queasy feeling is the most likely response of the majority of the population. To implement long-term behavioral changes in the general population, technical norms and economic incentives are crucial; public education may help but will not be sufficient.
- *Political effects:* The mass media construct a "reality" that politicians and political institutions cannot afford to ignore ("medialization of politics"). A high level of media coverage serves as a warning signal for the political system that something is going on that may endanger political legitimacy. Furthermore, politicians and political institutions may conclude that they have something to gain in terms of popularity and political support if they engage in that field. The media image of climate change as a severe risk thus creates potential for political change. However, there are several barriers to the use of that potential: (1) political lobbying of interest groups profiting from the *status quo*, (2) the global scale of the problem requiring international coordination, and (3) the possibility of loss of popularity among voters because of policy measures that imply burdens. Given the dilemma of politics – expectation of political measures on one hand, barriers to their implementation on the other hand – politicians may be tempted to implement only symbolic measures that demonstrate activism, hurt nobody but neither solve the problem. It will be the task of engaged NGOs, experts and the media to monitor the political system and make sure that the policy addresses the climate change problem not only on a symbolic level.