

Climate Change Information and Media: A Study Among Youth in India

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is a scientific, health, political, economic, national security, environmental, moral and religious issue, among many others. The article presents the findings of a study which investigates what messages and messengers best engage young people with climate science and its solutions. The opinions and media habits of young adults, aged 18-25 currently residing and studying in two metropolises of India, Bengaluru (Bangalore) and Chennai (Madras) vis-à-vis climate change have been elicited and interpreted. A survey of 500 randomly selected college and university students studying and residing in these two metropolises have revealed a heightened concern for the global environment and climate change issues among youth. The extent of information the respondents had on climate change issues was considerable. The respondents relied more on social media, especially blogs and networking groups for information on climate change, than the traditional mass media. Gender, economic status, course of study, and parental education were some of the important variables strongly associated with knowledge about climate change issues.

KEYWORDS

Climate Change, Internet, Parental Education, Youth

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is today a major problem, with reports of a steadily warming planet, vanishing species, diminishing waters, and rising seas and oceans, forcing countries to formulate national and international policies and plans of action. Today climate change has begun to impact millions of lives, and therefore efforts to address the issue of a steadily heating planet have necessitated immediate attention.

Scientists and researchers have begun to produce evidences of human carbon footprints on the planet which suggests that people at the individual level can play a major role in slowing down the pace of climate change and reversing its effects. Evidences surmount that individual action begins with awareness and a heightened consciousness towards adopting environmental friendly practices. Public knowledge and awareness of climate change issues, thus becomes important in the efforts to mitigate and reverse climate change. And communication is a key intervention in efforts to motivate people to make environmentally-friendly choices in their daily lives.

Environmental communication scholars, James Cantrill and Christine Oravec (1996), have reiterated that “the environment we experience, and affect is largely a product of how we come to talk about the world” (p. 2). Therefore, the information, images and perceptions we receive from various media around us, plays a powerful role in influencing how we perceive our environment and the action we could take towards its conservation. Research suggests that merging the ideas and philosophy of environmentalism and the structure of media communication will help in increasing awareness of climate change problems and will foster the skills and strategies for solving those problems.

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Communication about the environment matters. It matters in the way we look at and understand the universe around us, our relationship with nature, the way we conduct our day-to-day lives, the manner in which we live an environmentally friendly life and the choices we make in our world. Mass media plays an important role in informing the public, raising awareness and understanding of science and promoting positive action. The media is a strategic partner in the area of climate information dissemination, warning, adaptation and mitigation. Mass media representational practices have broadly affected translations between science and policy and have shaped perceptions of various issues of environment, technology and risk (Weingart et al., 2000). Studies have found that the public learns a large amount about science through consuming mass media news (Wilson, 1995).

In what are conventionally regarded as ‘developed nations’, public surveys have found that television and daily newspapers are the primary sources of information (Biernacki et al., 2008; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Carvalho & Pereira, 2008). The media has been established as very important players in climate change communication as most people do not read scientific reports, or the reports of international organizations on their websites, and the media therefore becomes their only source of information. Very few people have access to the science literature and to policy documents, so they generally rely on media representations of climate change. Mass media helps to interpret and translate important but difficult information and processes. In terms of reaching a mass audience and shaping public awareness, public engagement as well as public support for positive action, mass media, therefore, plays a very important role.

STUDIES ON PUBLIC’S SOURCES AND PERCEPTIONS

Several studies have suggested that in some countries where low levels of media reporting of climate change have historically been the case, it may now be changing. In India, English language national newspaper coverage of climate change or global warming rose strongly between mid-2008 and at the end of 2009 (Boykoff, 2010). In China, a 2009 study suggested that the amount of coverage in Chinese media shot up in 2007 after very low coverage from 1998 to 2006, though it declined again in 2008 (Yan Wu, 2010). Studies of media coverage of climate change in Latin America indicate that Brazil has the highest levels of awareness and public concern than any other country in the world (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992).

However, despite this increased coverage of climate change, it is still not at the top of the media agenda or public priority list. “If you don’t have climate change as a headline in the press,” says Nisbet, who writes the blog *Framing Science*, “it’s unlikely to be a top-tier issue in the public or among policy makers” (Russell, 2008). Environmental journalists working in traditional media today have to deal with a “shrinking news hole while facing a growing need to tell longer, complicated, more in-depth stories”. The competition for shrinking news space increases pressure on journalists to simplify or dramatize issues to ensure that a story gets out. As a result, we are witnessing a rapid growth in alternative (online) media, offering greater freedom and news space (Friedman, 2004). A cursory search of online media reports suggests that coverage of climate change issues is steadily and noticeably rising in the online media (Boykoff & Rajan, 2010).

Studies on people’s sources of information about climate change, their perceptions and understanding of the issue reveals that exposure to climate change issues and an understanding of the same, depends on several factors. Leiserowitz and Thaker’s (2012) survey of 4,031 adult respondents in India under the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and GlobeScan focused on awareness and knowledge of and attitude towards climate change. Almost half the respondents had never heard of climate while a little more than half of those surveyed were of the opinion that human activities are a major contributor of climate change. The study found that education of the respondents was strongly associated with their knowledge of climate change as well as adoption of efforts by them to tackle climate change. Majority of respondents considered scientists and mass media to be the most trusted sources of information on global warming. Among the mass media, television and

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