



## Competing Media Stories and U.S. Public Opinion on Climate Change

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The first decade of 21st century began with optimism for Americans who want action to combat climate change, yet ended in 2010 with dashed hopes. Startling shifts in public views were part of what happened. As scientists sounded alarms, public support for action reached a peak after the debut of the movie *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, followed in 2007 by the Nobel Prize to its author Al Gore and a major report from a U.N. panel. But then public concern declined, just as the U.S. Congress considered legislation and world representatives met at the Copenhagen Summit to negotiate a climate agreement. From January 2007 to October 2009, the proportion of Americans agreeing that “there is solid evidence that the Earth is warming” dropped from 77% to 57% – and the fall-off among Republicans was precipitous, opening a large partisan gap. In 2007, 62% of Republicans said there was solid evidence; but only 35% agreed in October 2009 (and by then only 18% of Republican respondents attributed warming “mostly” to human activities).

Why the dramatic drops? Economic hard times played a part, but cannot account for the growing partisan divide. Eroding public concern was also encouraged by stories about climate change told by increasingly partisan media outlets. Humans are a “storytelling animal,” in the apt phrase of Alasdair MacIntyre. We use credible narratives to make sense of complex phenomena – especially matters like climate change that are beyond direct personal observation. Stories feature threats or challenges, identify villains and heroes, and help us decide what side to choose in a conflict.

### Tales of Climate Change

To probe the stories Americans were watching from 2001 to 2010, I used carefully calibrated word counts to track the frequencies of six basic narratives in television news. *Climate Tragedy* stories tell of impending disaster, with big energy as villains and environmental advocates and scientists as heroes. *He Said, She Said* stories suggest we should wait to act, because scientists disagree; and *Don't Kill the Goose* stories point to government regulation as the real threat. The *Hoax* story-line invokes a sinister conspiracy by scientists and liberal elites seeking to empower an overbearing government, while the countervailing *Denialist Conspiracy* invokes right-wing conspirators funded by energy interests to push the false hoax account. The Policy Game narrative presents policy arguments as horse-races, where the viewer can root for one entrant over others.

### What Stories Did Different Outlets Tell?

My results show how differently network and cable outlets reported climate stories:

- For traditional network news, *Climate Tragedy* stories initially grew in prominence, suggesting that America's addiction to fossil fuels is leading towards disaster. ABC News gave considerable play to such stories in 2006, the year *An Inconvenient Truth* was released, and even more play in 2007. Strikingly, though, when the nation and the world deliberated about remedies in 2009, ABC went AWOL and aired only a fraction of the stories it had broadcast two years before. CBS and NBC had strikingly similar coverage.
- Fox News took a different path, barely attending to climate change until 2007, when it pumped up coverage featuring *Hoax* stories that portrayed self-serving climate scientists scheming for big government policies in cahoots with the U.N., Al Gore, and other liberal elites. During 2009, Fox continued to shout “hoax!” – culminating in the “Climategate” fuss over emails purloined from researchers portrayed as over-hyping the climate threat.
- MSNBC provided much less coverage of climate change issues than other networks, but what they did air were *Denialist Conspiracy* stories in clear counterpoint to Fox's Hoax stories.

- The remaining source of television news, CNN, went for maximum conflict. In 2006 and 2007, CNN programs often alternated hourly between *Tragedy* stories and *Hoax* tales. In 2009, when CNN offered extensive coverage before and during the Copenhagen Summit, its favorite formula was to pit the two narratives against each other in the same program.

## The Impact of Clashing Narratives

What difference did media coverage make? For viewers of ABC and the other traditional networks, climate change might not have seemed to be a pressing issue after 2007, whereas CNN viewers were likely to be confused. MSNBC viewers heard the clashing allegations about political conspiracies. Viewers sticking to Fox heard little until 2007, and then were told that human-induced climate change is a hoax. Media researchers have found that conservatives are often loyal Fox viewers, so the collapse of concern about climate change among Republicans may well have been directly related to media stories they were consuming.

Media stories are not all that matter, of course, but they do have an impact. If one side purveys a consistent narrative to people predisposed to accept it, while the other side fails to get its story out, it is obvious who will win the hearts and minds of the public. The moral is that people who want action on climate change need to meet the story-telling challenge. Advocates and responsible media must offer dramatic narratives that are truthful and politically persuasive.

**Read more in Frederick W. Mayer, “[Stories of Climate Change: Competing Narratives, the Media, and U.S. Public Opinion, 2001-2010](#),” Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper, Harvard University, February 2012.**