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9 **Media(ted) discourses and climate change: a**  
10 **focus on political subjectivity and**  
11 **(dis)engagement**

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13 **Keywords**

14 Media, climate change, citizen, engagement, political subjectivity

15 **Abstract**

16 Research has shown that the media are the main source of information and the main factor  
17 shaping people's awareness and concern in relation to climate change and therefore have an  
18 important role in setting the public agenda. As a key forum for the production, reproduction and  
19 transformation of the meaning of public issues, the media influence understandings of risks,  
20 responsibilities, as well as of the functioning of democratic politics. This article argues that the  
21 media also matter to citizens' perception of their (potential) political agency or their political  
22 subjectivity. Media representations construct particular 'subject positions' for individuals and  
23 cultivate dispositions to action or inaction. The article discusses the importance of citizens'  
24 political engagement with climate change and points out some aspects of media(ted) discourses  
25 that may constrain the perceived possibilities of participation in the politics of climate change.  
26 While engagement with climate change has multiple dimensions and a number of barriers have  
27 been identified through empirical studies, this article offers a critique of the role of the media in  
28 political engagement with the problem and suggests avenues for future research.

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1 The media are both important arenas and important agents in the production, reproduction  
2 and transformation of the meanings of social issues. The particular discourses that they amplify  
3 strongly affect the social construction of problems and of 'authorized voices'. Therefore,  
4 media(ted) discourses play key roles in social life as they are both conditions of intelligibility of the  
5 world and conditions of possibility of action upon it [1] .

6 Research has shown that the media have an important influence over people's perceptions of  
7 the 'distant' and unobtrusive issue of climate change [2, 3, 4]. Access to scientific information,  
8 political arguments and even ethical debates on this matter depends on the media(ted)  
9 discourses citizens' consume. Media coverage has been a key factor in raising levels of  
10 awareness and concern in the last decade or so [5]. Representations of the problem in the media  
11 are also likely to have influenced citizens' understanding of both the risks associated to climate  
12 change and the responsibilities in addressing the problem. Moreover, the social credibility and  
13 social authority of different social actors, their claims and arguments, are also largely defined by  
14 discursive exchanges taking place in the media [6, 7].

15 There are complex and dynamic connections between social practices and mediated textual  
16 practices. The processes of production and consumption of media discourse can be usefully  
17 understood as a series of cultural circuits where both encoding and decoding (i.e. how  
18 interpretations of the world are built into and read from signs) interact and co-evolve with political,  
19 economic and regulatory frameworks, and where the 'public' and 'private' spheres<sup>i</sup> intersect [8]  
20 Personal meaning-making draws both on media(ted) discourses and on lived experiences and  
21 social relations.

22 Political possibilities are conditioned by discursive constructions that are dominant (or felt as  
23 such) in a particular historical-cultural context. At a more fundamental level, so is the perception  
24 of one's own (potential) political roles and capacity. This article examines the relation between  
25 citizens' discursively constructed political subjectivity and the possibilities of participation in the  
26 politics of climate change. While engagement with climate change has multiple dimensions and a  
27 number of barriers have been identified through empirical studies [9], this article offers a critique  
28 of the role of the media in political engagement with the problem and suggests avenues for future  
29 research.

### 30 **The case for political engagement on climate change**

31 There can hardly be an issue more eminently political than climate change. It depends on  
32 decisions regarding collective matters, such as transport and energy, and the choices that are  
33 made have crucial implications for all living individuals, as well as unborn ones, both within and  
34 beyond national borders. Crucially, climate change also broadens the political field insofar as it  
35 transforms realities previously perceived as private and a-political, such as car use, into  
36 contentious options of collective significance. The policy and regulatory transformations that are

1 needed to effectively address the problem are far-reaching and political systems are unlikely to  
2 put them in place without a sustained display of public support (if not demand) [10]. Moreover,  
3 appropriate responses to climate change require the reconciliation of a variety of value-informed  
4 claims and interests. The only arrangements that may be viable in the long run are those that  
5 accommodate a diversity of positions or, in other words, that are equitable and fair. The voices  
6 and arguments that get to be heard and that get to be incorporated in policy decisions are key for  
7 the future of climate change.

8 In the last two decades, a number of scholars have promoted a wider participation of the  
9 public in science-related debates and decisions as a source of increased legitimacy, a basis of  
10 accountability and a guarantee of social and ethical relevance [11, 12]. Studies of citizen juries,  
11 citizen advisory boards, consensus conferences and other mechanisms of public participation  
12 indicate that valuable insight can be gained from involving citizens in decision-making [13].  
13 Nevertheless, those mechanisms have so far had a limited impact in political life. These (typically)  
14 top-down exercises have in some cases been criticized for remaining closed-off to citizens as  
15 many aspects of decision-making continue to be constructed as 'technical' and 'non-political' and  
16 because citizens' views have had little, if any, consequences on the expert/political bodies [14,  
17 15]. Furthermore, despite official commitments to promoting public participation in responding to  
18 climate change, there is evidence that governments' understanding of citizen engagement is  
19 mainly instrumental and based on a narrow conception of participatory democracy [16].

20 While institutional spaces with citizen participation are important and there is ongoing interest  
21 in the design of new forums to integrate citizens, experts and various stakeholders [17], the idea  
22 of political participation that is adopted in this article overflows those formal arenas. The  
23 boundaries of 'the political' are here not delimited by institutionalized politics or government but  
24 stretch to include all forms of (discursive) action on collective problems taking place in public  
25 spaces<sup>ii</sup>. Such action can take the form of a demonstration, an article in a newspaper or an online  
26 petition, any of which may serve to critique a political option, mobilize others for change or  
27 otherwise challenge power structures. These forms of informal political participation and citizen  
28 mobilization can be an important factor in political decision-making and could influence national  
29 and international policies on climate change. Political engagement of citizens could not only force  
30 governments to act but also improve the quality of the decisions as well as their acceptability<sup>iii</sup>.

31 There are multiple indications that citizen engagement with the politics of climate change is  
32 quite low [2, 10]. What objective and/or subjective conditions may explain this? A survey of over  
33 two thousand people recently conducted in the US by Yale and George Mason Universities  
34 provides some interesting cues into people's relation to climate change politics. One of the  
35 questions aimed to assess levels of political activism, conceptualized as the act of having 'written  
36 letters, emailed, or phoned government officials to urge them to take action to reduce global  
37 warming' in the previous year [Reference 18, p. 23]. 8% of respondents declared that they had

1 done so although with different frequencies (from once to 'many times'). People were also asked  
2 what 'reasons might prevent [them] from taking [those] actions'. Out of ten possible answers, 'I  
3 am not an activist' was the most chosen one (by 33% of respondents). This is a statement about  
4 a subjective condition: the main declared reason for not engaging in political action is one's  
5 perceived identity. It is also worth mentioning that 10% of the people chose the option 'I would  
6 feel uncomfortable', which may be viewed as a similar motivation. 22% chose the option 'It  
7 wouldn't make any difference if I did', a justification that suggests a sense of political  
8 powerlessness<sup>iv</sup>.

9 Ockwell, Whitmarsh and O'Neill have recently examined the reasons for the public's divorce  
10 from climate politics. Amongst other aspects, they pointed out that Hansard's latest Audit of  
11 Political Engagement in the UK [19] indicated a 'lack of political self-efficacy (...): less than one  
12 third of people believe that "when people like me get involved in politics, they can really change  
13 the way the country is run."' [Reference 10, p. 318]

14 The data mentioned above provide a stark picture of people's sense of their (potential) political  
15 power and of the possibilities for civic action in democratic societies. The first survey suggests  
16 that this may be a central aspect of political disengagement in relation to climate change.  
17 Moreover, it hints at an identity chasm in relation to civic politics. Evidently, identifying the  
18 reasons of these perceptions is a critical task for social research. This article postulates that it is  
19 worth looking at how those notions may be rooted in the symbolic environment in which current  
20 democratic politics is enacted and at the role of the media therein. In order to do so, it suggests  
21 that it may be productive to draw on – and create bridges between – a variety of theoretical  
22 traditions and research fields, from media and political sociology to postmarxist discourse theory.

### 23 **Culture of citizenship in a mediated world**

24 The relation between the media and participation in political life has been the subject of much  
25 contestation. Whereas some scholars have hailed the media, old and new, as forces of social  
26 mobilization, which generate political interest and an active citizenry [20, 21, 22] others have  
27 condemned them as the cause of lack of trust in politics, cynicism, political apathy, and alienation  
28 [23, 24, 25]. Empirical studies have given fodder to both the mobilization and the 'media malaise'  
29 theses. Some researchers have shown a positive correlation between media consumption and  
30 levels of political talk and participation [26, 27] and a positive effect of the internet in levels of  
31 political information and political participation [28, 29], as well as in the empowerment of  
32 marginalized groups [30]. Others have found evidence that television distances people from  
33 community life and promotes civic disengagement [31]; have claimed that the internet reproduces  
34 differences of power and participation [32]; and that it 'increasingly encourages the individual to  
35 look for private solutions to the problems of public nature which contributes to the understanding  
36 of citizenship not as a public but predominantly as a private affair.' [Reference 33, pp. 349].  
37 Finally, some studies have concluded that attitudinal differences may be associated with

1 consumption of specific types of media content (e.g. news or entertainment on television) rather  
2 than with a medium as a whole [34].

3 Despite these ambiguities in research, it is undeniable that the media are the main arenas for  
4 citizens' understanding of political struggles in our times. The notion of 'mediated citizenship' [35]  
5 acknowledges the centrality of the media in contemporary public spheres and in the construction  
6 of notions of the 'citizen', their rights, their responsibilities and their space for political action. In a  
7 media-saturated environment, perceptions of distribution of power, of the role of individuals in  
8 democracy and of the effectiveness of civic action are a function of multiple discursive  
9 representations that can be accessed via television news, street billboards, blogs, radio talk  
10 shows or mass emails, amongst many other forms. Crucially, media(ted) discourses also  
11 influence people's view of their own position in the chessboard of politics and are also constitutive  
12 of the political self, cultivating dispositions to action or inaction.

13 Individual self-recognition as a (potential) political agent therefore relates to one's (perceived)  
14 symbolic standing. The 'political self' is understood here as an interpretive construct regarding  
15 one's own position in the political world; it is a crucial dimension of political subjectivity, the  
16 (mediated) experience of politics and associated views and beliefs. Drawing on Laclau and  
17 Mouffe [36], as well as Giddens [37], the view adopted in this article is that political subjectivity  
18 depends on 'subject positions' in a discursive structure but that there are also possibilities for  
19 action within that structure. It is produced in the context of particular discourses and a contingent  
20 set of social relations but it is never fully fixed. Therefore it is subject to change and can be  
21 transformed.

## 22 **Media representations and political subjectivity**

23 What aspects of the media's representations of the world may hinder, rather than promote,  
24 political engagement? In this part of the article, several problematic issues are outlined. Some  
25 concern specifically climate change but others are of a more general nature as people's identities  
26 and subjectivities are constructed and reconstructed within the whole (mediated) discursive field.

27

### 28 *Representations of the public's political (in)capability*

29 Research has shown that the public is often associated in the media with a less-than-rational  
30 approach to social issues. For instance, in their analysis of representations of citizens in  
31 television in the US and Britain, Lewis, Wahl-Jorgensen and Inthorn concluded that the  
32 predominant image is of a passive, reactive and self-interested public. 'There is a sense here that  
33 ordinary citizens are almost childlike: they have moods, experiences and emotions, but they are  
34 rarely seen making forays into a deliberative public sphere.' [Reference 38; pp. 160].

35 Polls feature frequently in the media and in political discourse as proxies of public opinion and  
36 are used for purposes of directing attention to an issue or position, legitimating a given policy or

1 promoting opposition towards a political choice. They are a powerful rhetorical device. Höppner  
2 has analysed representations of polls about climate change in British newspapers and suggested  
3 that the public has often been portrayed as denying of climate change, with apathetic and  
4 hypocritical attitudes towards the problem and as 'deficient in terms of rationality, reliability,  
5 authenticity, consistency, acceptance, and behaviour' [Reference 39, p. 14]. In some cases,  
6 interpretations of the actual questions that were asked and of the distributions of answers were  
7 clearly distorted in order to fit a particular value preference.

8 The media may often be reproducing official discourses regarding public participation. Based  
9 on the analysis of the UK Climate Change Programme, Höppner maintains that 'citizens are  
10 expected to engage by adopting the 'right attitude', by performing prescribed behaviours, and by  
11 consenting to governmental measures' [Reference 16, p. 1].

12 As political agents with positions, ideas and proposals for addressing climate change and  
13 other public matters, citizens have been largely left out of media(ted) discourses. These  
14 exclusionary constructions do not recognize citizens as worthy speakers on the substance of  
15 collective problems and do not cultivate a proactive political identity. New media, such as blogs  
16 and other types of websites, have enabled self- and hetero-representation of citizens in  
17 alternative ways and thereby contributed to diversify this picture [e.g. 40]. More empowering  
18 modes of implicating citizens in discourse are certainly also possible for the mainstream  
19 corporate media.

#### 20 21 *The 'media politics of dissent' [41]*

22 There is no doubt that social movements have influenced discourses on environmental issues  
23 and others in the last few decades [42], and that the development of new and alternative (non-  
24 commercial and typically non-professional) media has significantly enhanced the possibilities of  
25 civic politics. The Global Justice Movement [43] and media projects like *Indymedia*, *The Nation*  
26 and *Democracy Now!* are good examples of how new media, particularly Internet-based ones,  
27 may be used to create framings of global issues that challenge the dominant discourses in the  
28 mainstream corporate media [44; 45]. Often interactive and linked to mobile technologies, these  
29 media can be critical in the enactment of resistance [46]. The recent appearance of a number of  
30 civic initiatives on climate change, such as Rising Tide, Oilwatch, Carbon Rationing Action  
31 Groups, Transition Towns, 350.org and others, suggests that there is scope for critical  
32 engagement in the global politics of climate change<sup>v</sup>.

33 Greenpeace is the most media savvy of environmental groups and their communication  
34 strategies have garnered a significant visibility around the world. In some cases, this has  
35 produced successful outcomes for the organization [47]. How this has contributed to the public  
36 understanding of environmental problems and politics is less clear. However, research has long  
37 shown that the relation between social movements and the media can be antagonistic and that

1 the journalistic reconstruction of civic action often empties it of its political content [48]. Several  
2 studies have pointed out that challenges to corporate-led globalization are predominantly  
3 portrayed as akin to undesirable social disorder in the mainstream media [49, 50, 51]. The 'anti-  
4 globalization' movement typically gets a shallow and biasing representation where the 'violent  
5 protest' frame is dominant and there is little or no acknowledgement and analysis of the stances  
6 of the movement in relation to key issues like international trade, poverty or environmental  
7 change. Similarly, acts of environmental sabotage, designed to protect nature while not harming  
8 humans, have increasingly been presented in the news media as 'ecoterrorism' [52].

9 Cottle [41] has recently argued that the media politics of dissent may be changing not only  
10 because the current media ecology offers more opportunities for independent communication but  
11 also because some 'old media' may occasionally engage in the 'manufacture of dissent' [53] and  
12 produce more progressive interpretations of civic action. He also cited data from several polls  
13 suggesting a growing public support for demonstrations [Reference 41, p. 857]. Replacing a  
14 culture of conformity, which according to Ivie [54] stigmatizes difference and conflict, with a  
15 culture of dissent may require significant transformations beyond the media. Nonetheless, these  
16 are encouraging signs.

#### 17 18 *Political scales and citizen agency*

19 A large part of mainstream media stories about climate change are set in the context of high-  
20 profile intergovernmental meetings and advance the notion that the global is the appropriate  
21 political space for action. A study of the volume of print media coverage at a series of key  
22 moments since 1990 in Portugal has shown that the peaks coincided with international summits;  
23 in contrast, key national events, such as the public presentation of the Portuguese Climate  
24 Change Plan in 2001 and the presentation of the Portuguese Plan of Allocation of Emissions  
25 Allowances in 2004, received little media attention. Content analysis and discourse analysis of  
26 articles has also shown a disproportional representation of international politics and that the  
27 media often (implicitly) constituted the global into the appropriate locus of action [55]. Similarly,  
28 Olausson [56] has maintained that mitigation was mainly represented as a transnational  
29 responsibility in Swedish media. Sampei and Aoyagi-Usui's [5] analysis of newspaper coverage in  
30 Japan made visible that most peaks coincided with high-status international summits (national  
31 events only achieved significant attention when they were associated with media-oriented  
32 campaigns).

33 While this can partly be expected given the relevance of international negotiations for the  
34 management of climate change, it can also be argued that the national and the local are the right  
35 levels to act. Yet, sustained analysis of the possibilities for local policy-making on climate change  
36 features only rarely in the mainstream media. Hence, while climate change may be represented  
37 as a tragic threat, debate on the climate impacts of a new road or a new housing development

1 does not necessarily take place in a meaningful way. There is an apparent disconnect between  
2 climate change and specific sources of greenhouse gas emissions and between the global and  
3 local scales.

4 It is likely that this has influenced perceptions and ideas about the scale of climate change.  
5 Multiple surveys show that people tend to rank climate change higher as a problem for the world  
6 than as a problem for their own country or region [57, 5]. Furthermore, by constructing climate  
7 change primarily as a global political issue these discourses construct citizen agency as minute.  
8 Citizens are likely to feel powerless to affect processes and decisions at the global level. Such a  
9 setting emphasizes the distance between ordinary citizens and decision-making and reinforces  
10 the image of climate politics as being reserved to the heads of the most powerful states. As the  
11 management of climate change is, in most mediated discourses, the realm of (scientific and  
12 political) elites citizens are constituted into spectators or bystanders<sup>vi</sup>.

13 Perceptions of the politics of climate change and of one's roles therein are also inexorably  
14 intertwined with wider discourses on 'globalisation'. Policy-makers, international organisations  
15 and – most obviously – corporations have been representing the 'mobility' of capital and  
16 production across the world as 'natural' and 'inevitable' processes [58]. This construction of  
17 globalisation, which is left unquestioned by many of the mainstream media, omits responsibility  
18 for particular choices and leaves no scope for citizen participation and informed deliberation.

19 Processes of globalization are of course complex and have many faces. It can be argued that  
20 while globalization means that there is no centre of power to work as a focus of contestation and  
21 resistance, the development of information and communication technologies has greatly  
22 facilitated the constitution of transnational forms of civic organization. Scholars like Szerszynski  
23 [59, 60] and Beck [61] have suggested that the media may contribute to the development of  
24 global or cosmopolitan forms of citizenship. Significant impacts on the politics of climate change  
25 remain to be seen but the development of civic movements mentioned above may suggest that  
26 some transformation is under way.

## 27 **Closing remarks**

28 Ockwell, Whitmarsh and O'Neill have recently argued that fostering social demand for political  
29 regulation could be a useful strategy to respond to climate change but pointed out that various  
30 factors may inhibit it [10]. In a similar line, this article has brought citizens' political engagement  
31 with climate change to the fore and discussed the role of the media in relation to political  
32 subjectivity. The critical analysis that was done here is by no means exhaustive. Besides the  
33 three aspects that were emphasized, many other factors may constrain people's sense of political  
34 agency or willingness for political participation, including a widespread disillusion with democratic  
35 politics, media alarmism and the sheer magnitude of climate change in spatial and temporal  
36 terms. Moreover, as Shanahan and McComas [62] have maintained, the wider media(ted) culture  
37 permanently appeals to values like 'progress' and materialism, contribute to maintaining the



1 status quo and dissuade audiences that they can or should play a role in solving environmental  
2 problems.

3 The main conclusion of this article is that it is worth investigating the roles of the media in the  
4 processes of political (dis)engagement in relation to climate change, and doing so in light of  
5 diverse theoretical contributions. Future research should focus on the role of new and alternative  
6 media (such as multimodal websites, videocasts and 'social media' like Facebook) in the  
7 empowerment and performance of resistance in climate change-related movements. It should  
8 analyse the communicative spaces where new forms of political subjectivity may be developing. It  
9 should probe into new varieties of 'collective political subjectivity'<sup>vii</sup>, which are likely to be multi-  
10 scalar and flexible [63]. And it should continue to scrutinize the politics of recognition of civic  
11 agents by the mainstream media and implications for climate change.

## 12 **Notes**

13 \*Please note that all endnotes were placed automatically at the end of this  
14 document.\*

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## 16 Further Reading

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## 28 Cross-References

- 29 CC-0224: Barriers to engagement
- 30 CC-0227: Communicating climate change
- 31 CC-0230: Sources, media and modes of climate change communication
- 32 CC-0233: Theory and language of climate change communication
- 33 CC-0234: Individual and collective perceptions of climate change
- 34 CC-0235: Individual understandings of climate change

1 CC-0236: Perceptions of climate change worldwide

2 CC-0239: Framing climate change and public discourses

### 3 **Supplementary Information**

4 [Click here to insert Supplementary information text](#)

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### 6 **Reviewer suggestions**

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<sup>i</sup> The boundaries of the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres are of course changing and often blurred. Nonetheless, these concepts help distinguish sites with different degrees of visibility.

<sup>ii</sup> Still, this notion does not go as far as some poststructuralist scholarship, which postulates that there is ‘no outside’ to politics.

Political engagement is understood here as involvement in political activity and therefore is closely related to political participation, which refers to the actual political intervention.

<sup>iii</sup> Some would argue that widening participation on climate decision-making is not necessarily the most effective means to produce responses [64]. The view taken here is that despite the exceptional character of climate change as an object of political regulation, plural input and space for dissent are conditions of sustainability of any decisions in democratic government. As suggested by Mouffe [65], rather than the production of consensus, which can never be full or fixed, the defining trait of democracy should be the enablement of alternative voices and proposals and the creation of fair spaces of negotiation. Dissent can contribute to the development of new ideas and more creative possibilities.

<sup>iv</sup> Although significant, reported barriers to political activism related to more ‘selfish’ factors, such as ‘I’m too busy’ (18%) and ‘It’s too much effort’ (16%), were clearly less important. Finally, the option ‘I don’t know how’ gathered 17% of the answers while ‘I don’t think is important’ and ‘I do not believe in global warming’ got 10% each.

<sup>v</sup> It must be noted, however, that these examples refer mainly to the UK and most do not have a parallel in other countries.

<sup>vi</sup> This has been corroborated by free word association exercises and by a survey conducted in Portugal, which suggested that people view themselves as victims of climate change but not as agents of resolution of the problem, and have a very weak political culture concerning climate change [66, 2].

<sup>vii</sup> ‘Collective political subjectivity’ is linked to imagined communities of actors organized around a common social project.