

“If you think you’ve heard this story before, you haven’t seen anything yet”



A wildfire glows at dusk near Clear Range, Australia on January 31. Photo: Rick Rycroft/AP.



January media attention to climate change and global warming at the global level increased from Dec. 2019 coverage, **up about 4%**. Compared to a year earlier, the number of news articles and segments **nearly doubled**.



Regionally, the ongoing stream of stories in Jan. 2020 increased most in Oceania (**up 25%**) and North America (**up 15%**) from Dec. 2019. Increases in coverage in these regions in Jan. 2020 compared to Jan. 2019 was striking, with coverage in Oceania **up 144%** and coverage in North America **up 85%**.

Figure 1 shows trends in newspaper media coverage at the global scale – organized into seven geographical regions around the world – from January 2004 through January 2020.

At the national-level, coverage rose most in Australia (up 30%) in January 2020 compared to the previous month of December 2019. This coverage in January 2020 was also more than triple the amount of coverage in January 2019.

Coverage was also notably higher in the United Kingdom (UK), up 17% in January 2020 from December 2019 and up 123% from coverage in January 2019. And coverage in United States (US) television and newspapers increased 7.5% in January 2020 from the previous month while going up 43% from January 2019.

In January, *ecological* and *meteorological* connections with climate issues continued to

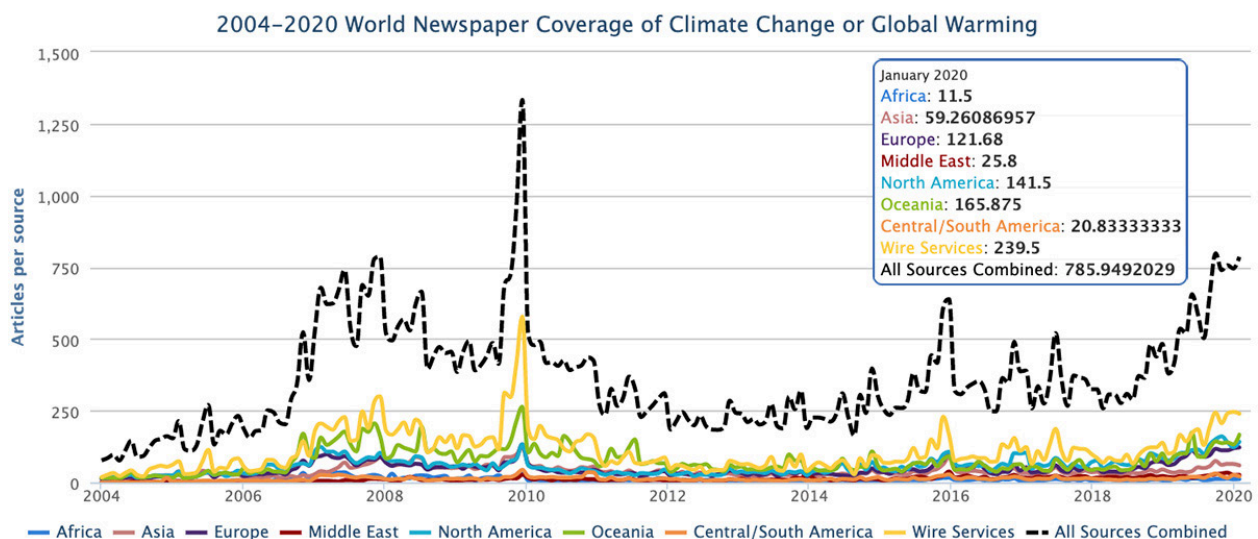
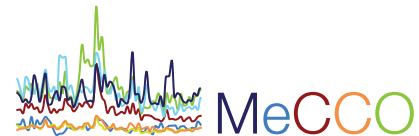


Figure 1. Newspaper media coverage of climate change or global warming in one-hundred print sources in seven different regions around the world, from January 2004 through January 2020.

# MECCO MONTHLY SUMMARIES

## ISSUE 37, JANUARY 2020



contribute substantially to media coverage of climate change around the world. To illustrate, the ongoing domestic as well as international reports on ongoing Australian wildfires generated numerous media reports that connected the dots between these fires and a changing climate. As the death toll rose into the twenties while 12 million acres have burned and nearly a billion animals have been displaced or killed, media coverage intensified. For example, *Washington Post* journalist Andrew Freedman reported, “While bush fires are a regular occurrence during the Australian dry season, a combination of long-term climate change and natural variability is making the situation far worse. Human-caused global warming is raising the odds of and severity of extreme-heat events and also adding to the severity of wildfires by speeding the drying of the landscape, among other influences. One of the most robust conclusions of climate studies has been that human-caused warming would increase the frequency and severity of heat waves and also boost the occurrence of days with extreme fire danger”.<sup>1</sup>

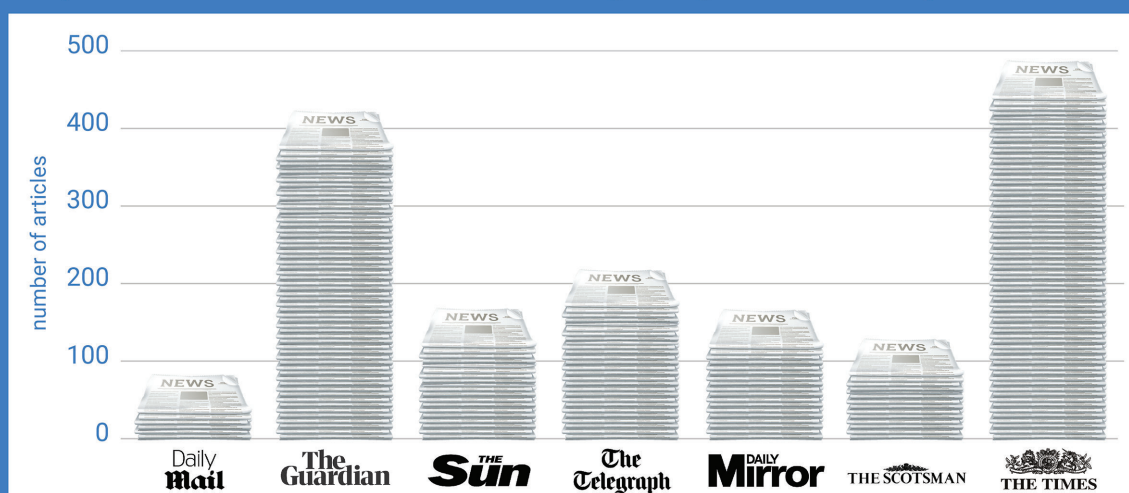
1 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/01/04/record-shattering-heat-strong-winds-cause-australias-bush-fire-crisis-escalate>



Coverage rose most in Australia (**up 30%**) in Jan. 2020 compared to the previous month of Dec. 2019. This coverage in Jan. 2020 was also more than triple the amount of coverage in Jan. 2019. Coverage was also notably higher in the UK, **up 17%** in Jan. 2020 from Dec. 2019 and **up 123%** from coverage in Jan. 2019. And coverage in US television and newspapers increased **7.5%** in Jan. 2020 from the previous month while going **up 43%** from Jan. 2019.

However, as media mogul Rupert Murdoch owns News Corp Australia that, in turn, runs nearly 60% of Australia’s daily media organizations, this control over narratives became part of the stories appearing in January 2020. For example, *New York Times* journalist Damian Cave reported, “The idea that “greenies” or environmentalists would oppose measures to prevent fires from ravaging homes and lives is simply false. But the comment reflects a narrative that’s been promoted for months by conservative Australian media outlets,

### UK print news stories on climate change or global warming in Jan. 2020



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Figure 2. Number of news stories per outlet in January 2020 across UK newspapers *Daily Mail & Mail on Sunday*; *Guardian & Observer*; *Sun, The News of the World & Sunday Sun*; *Telegraph & Sunday Telegraph*; *The Daily Mirror & Sunday Mirror*; *The Scotsman & Scotland on Sunday*; and *Times & Sunday Times*.

Domestic as well as international reports on Australian wildfires generated numerous media reports that connected the dots between fires and a changing climate. As the death toll rose into the twenties while **12 million** acres have burned and **nearly a billion** animals have been displaced or killed, media coverage intensified.



Twitter/@Greeeeengr1

especially the influential newspapers and television stations owned by Rupert Murdoch. And it's far from the only Murdoch-fueled claim making the rounds. His standard-bearing national newspaper, *The Australian*, has also repeatedly argued that this year's fires are no worse than those of the past – not true, scientists say, noting that 12 million acres have burned so far, with 2019 alone scorching more of New South Wales than the previous 15 years combined".<sup>2</sup>

News Corp Australia, via *The Australian*, pushed back while also accusing other outlets of political motivations behind their critiques. The Editors wrote, "our factual account of bushfires, climate change and the remedies, as well as our editorial commentary on these issues, have been wilfully and ineptly misrepresented by *The New York Times* and *The Guardian Australia* as climate denial. The truth is that the political and media reaction to this devastating bushfire season is a bid to replay the May election and get a different result. There is a belief that *The Australian* – having predicted the result – is somehow complicit in driving policies

2 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/world/australia/fires-murdoch-disinformation.html>

that promote devastating bushfires. This is not only disingenuous but disgraceful".<sup>3</sup>

Journalist Zoe Samios from *The Sydney Morning Herald* reflected, "As bushfires rip through the country, criticism of News Corp's climate change coverage in its Australian newspapers has been unrelenting. As the links between climate change and the ferocity of the bushfires played out, a subsidiary debate about the appropriateness of certain articles and opinion pieces in *The Australian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Herald Sun* gathered momentum... News Corp has run many pieces that have questioned the legitimacy of widely-accepted climate-change science over the past decade".<sup>4</sup>

In coverage across Australia and New Zealand, 'fire', 'fires' and 'bushfires' along with 'climate', 'change', 'Australia', 'Australian', 'government' and 'Morrison' all appeared in the top 25 most frequently used words in January 2020 news stories.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 3. Word frequencies in Australian and New Zealand print media sources in January 2020.

3 <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/editorials/cool-heads-needed-to-craft-response-to-bushfire-crisis/news-story/40aa0a6d351e8e5578f700dd76717548>

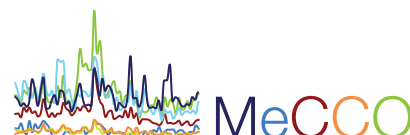
4 <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/inside-the-murdoch-family-climate-schism-20200116-p53ruu.html>

5 The top 25 words were climate, change, Australia, new, government, people, year, Australian, one, Morrison, emissions, world, fire, fires, also, time, words, now, minister, news, per, first, bushfires, just, and years.



# MECCO MONTHLY SUMMARIES

## ISSUE 37, JANUARY 2020



In January, *political* and *economic* content also shaped media coverage. Prominently, many media outlets abundantly covered the announcement early in January from BlackRock that they were divesting from carbon-based energy projects that posed significant risk to ongoing capitalist profitmaking. In particular, an open letter from CEO Laurence Fink garnered significant attention, as a break from business-as-usual and potentially (with the scale of BlackRock investments) a sign of emerging trends. For example, journalist Stephen Gandel from CBS News reported, “BlackRock, the world’s largest asset manager, says it is selling \$500 million of coal-related investments as part of a larger shift to make climate change central to its investment decisions. BlackRock founder and CEO Laurence Fink, who oversees the firm’s management of \$7 trillion in funds, announced the initiative in his influential annual letter to chief executives of major companies. The letter was posted on BlackRock’s website Tuesday. In it, Fink said he believes we are “on the edge of a fundamental reshaping of finance” because of a warming planet. Climate change has become the top issue raised by clients, Fink said in the letter, and it will soon affect everything from municipal bonds to long-term mortgages for homes”.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, *Washington Post* journalists Stephen Mufson and Rachel Siegel noted, “In a separate letter to investors, BlackRock announced it would exit investments with high environmental risks, including thermal coal, which is burned to produce electricity and creates carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas. BlackRock will also launch new investment products that screen for fossil fuels. The nation’s largest financial institutions are under increasing pressure from investors, activists and some political leaders for their tepid response to climate change, even as the Trump administration has systematically rolled back environmental regulations to promote economic growth”.<sup>7</sup>

Also in January, the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland – with particular attention paid to climate risk – led to media attention. Of note, the

6 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/blackrock-puts-climate-change-first-in-its-its-investment-strategy>

7 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/01/14/blackrock-letter-climate-change>



In coverage across Australia and New Zealand, ‘fire’, ‘fires’ and ‘bushfires’ along with ‘climate’, ‘change’, ‘Australia’, ‘Australian’, ‘government’ and ‘Morrison’ all appeared in the **top 25** most frequently used words in Jan. 2020 news stories.

annual risk report released ahead of the meeting contained news that for the first time the top five risk concerns related to climate, biodiversity loss, environment and sustainability. For example, journalist Larry Elliott from *The Guardian* reported, “A year of extreme weather events and mounting evidence of global heating have catapulted the climate emergency to the top of the list of issues worrying the world’s elite. The World Economic Forum’s annual risks report found that, for the first time in its 15-year history, the environment filled the top five places in the list of concerns likely to have a major impact over the next decade”.<sup>8</sup>

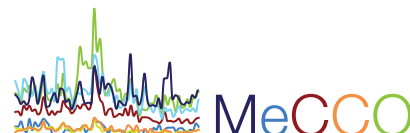
In January, *scientific* dimensions also grabbed media attention to climate change and global warming. For example, pronouncements that 2019 was the second-hottest year on record (and 2010-2019 was the hottest decade) generated media interest. First to report, the Copernicus Climate Change Service (supported by the European Union) made the announcement. Shortly thereafter, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced similar findings.

For example, journalist Drew Kann from *CNN* reported, “From France to Australia, from India to Alaska ... if you stepped outside in almost any corner of the globe, you could feel it. 2019 was hot. Really hot. In fact, we just lived through the second-hottest year ever recorded, according to the Copernicus Climate Change Service, the European Union’s flagship climate monitoring organization. The only year in recorded history

8 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jan/15/climate-crisis-environment-top-five-places-world-economic-forum-risks-report>

# MECCO MONTHLY SUMMARIES

## ISSUE 37, JANUARY 2020



the planet has experienced that was hotter was 2016, and only by a hair -- just 0.04 degrees Celsius. The past five years and the last decade (2010-2019) were the warmest ever recorded, the report found, and 2019 was the hottest year Europe has ever endured".<sup>9</sup>

Then the next week, following NOAA and NASA reports, further media coverage spread across the globe. NOAA and NASA noted 2019 as the second-hottest year on record while reporting that 19 of the hottest years since record-keeping began in 1850 have been in the last two decades. Moreover, it has been 43 years since global temperatures were cooler than the 20th century average: in other words, if you are 43 or younger, you have never experienced a cooler than average year on planet Earth.

For example, *Associated Press* journalist Seth Borenstein reported, "The decade that just ended was by far the hottest ever measured on Earth, capped off by the second-warmest year on record, two U.S. agencies reported Wednesday. And scientists said they see no end to the way man-made climate change keeps shattering records. "If you think you've heard this story before, you haven't seen anything yet," Gavin Schmidt, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, said at the close of a decade plagued by raging wildfires, melting ice and extreme weather that researchers have repeatedly tied to human activity. Schmidt said Earth as a whole is probably the hottest it has been during the Holocene – the past 11,500 years or so – meaning this could be the warmest period since the dawn of civilization. But scientists' estimates of ancient global temperatures, based on tree rings, ice cores and other telltale signs, are not precise enough to say that with certainty. The 2010s averaged 58.4 degrees Fahrenheit (14.7 degrees Celsius) worldwide, or 1.4 degrees (0.8 C) higher than the 20th century average and more than one-third of a degree (one-fifth of a degree C) warmer than the previous decade, which had been the hottest on record, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The decade had eight of the 10 hottest years on

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/08/world/2019-temperatures-second-hottest-year-on-record-climate-change/index.html>

Media outlets covered the announcement from BlackRock that they were divesting from carbon-based energy projects that posed significant risk to capitalist profitmaking. An open letter from CEO Larry Fink garnered attention, as a break from business-as-usual and potentially a sign of emerging trends.



Demonstrators carry a photo of BlackRock chief executive Larry Fink on December 6. Photo: Michael Robinson Chavez/*The Washington Post*.

record. The only other years in the top 10 were 2005 and 1998. NASA and NOAA also calculated that 2019 was the second-hottest year in the 140 years of record-keeping. Five other global teams of monitoring scientists agreed, based on temperature readings taken on Earth's surface, while various satellite-based measurements said it was anywhere from the hottest year on record to the third-hottest. Several scientists said the coming years will be even hotter, knocking these years out of the record books".<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Robert Lee Hotz noted, "The world experienced near-record global temperatures in 2019, federal climate scientists said. The year capped what the scientists said was the warmest decade in modern times".<sup>11</sup>

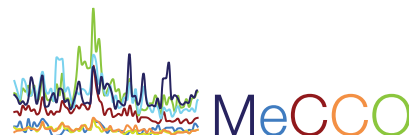
Not only did atmospheric temperatures in 2019 earn media attention. Record high ocean temperatures also generated media interest, stemming from a study published in *Advances*

<sup>10</sup> <https://apnews.com/9ba6b553a63f93ed70aa4405b2cbcf04>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/2019-was-second-warmest-year-on-record-federal-climate-scientists-say-11579105990>

# MECCO MONTHLY SUMMARIES

## ISSUE 37, JANUARY 2020



in Atmospheric Sciences that communicated findings that the past decades has been the warmest on record for the world's oceans while the rate of ocean warming has increased 500% in the last four decades. *Daily Mail* journalist Jonathan Chadwick reported, "The world's oceans were warmer in 2019 than at any other time in human history, according to a new study, amid fears that climate change is speeding up. Average global temperatures of the oceans in 2019 soared to 0.075°C (0.135°F) above the average temperature from between 1981 and 2010. To warm the world's water by this much requires a huge amount of energy, an estimated 228 sextillion joules of heat. Academics claim this is equivalent to 3.6 billion Hiroshima atom-bomb explosions".<sup>12</sup>

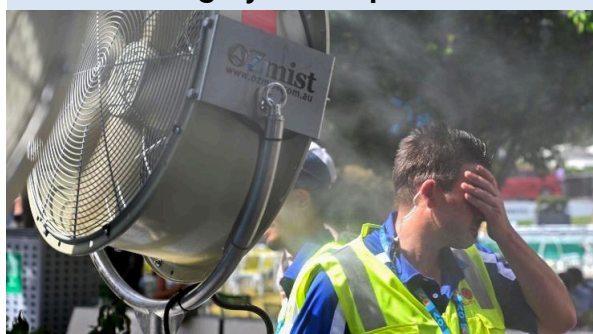
Finally, media accounts in January focused on **cultural** themes as well. For example, a Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists update about the Doomsday Clock moving closer to midnight (a.k.a. 'annihilation') attracted media reports. For example, US-based *ABC News* reporter Bill Hutchinson noted, "The world just got 20 seconds closer to catastrophe. Gauging the duel threats of nuclear warfare and climate change, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists announced on Thursday that the minute hand on the metaphorical "Doomsday Clock" has been moved forward to 100 seconds before midnight, the closest it has come to signaling a global meltdown".<sup>13</sup>

As another example, journalist David Welna from *US National Public Radio* reported, "Two years after moving the metaphorical minute hand of its Doomsday Clock to within two minutes of midnight – a figurative two-minute warning for all humanity – the science and security board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists revealed Thursday that it has moved that minute hand another 20 seconds closer to the midnight hour...With 13 Nobel laureates on its board and founded by scientists who worked on the atomic bomb-building Manhattan Project during World War II, the University of Chicago-based Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has used

12 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-7882695/Oceans-warmest-2019-human-history.html>

13 <https://abcnews.go.com/US/doomsday-clock-decision-looming-scientists-gauge-nuclear-climate/story?id=68299493>

NOAA and NASA noted 2019 as the **second-hottest year on record** while reporting that 19 of the hottest years since record-keeping began in 1850 have been in the last two decades. It has been 43 years since global temperatures were cooler than the 20th century average: **in other words, if you are 43 or younger, you have never experienced a cooler than average year on planet Earth.**



A man cools down near a mist fan during a heat wave in Melbourne, Australia. Photo: Saeed Khan/Getty Images.

its Doomsday Clock to register existential threat levels and raise awareness of them".<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, *BBC News* reported, "The clock now stands at its closest to doomsday since it began ticking. The idea began in 1947 to warn humanity of the dangers of nuclear war. Last year the clock was set at two minutes to midnight - midnight symbolises the end of the world - the same place it was wound to in 2018".<sup>15</sup>

Also, at the end of January - traversing **cultural** and **economic** themes - news broke that *The Guardian* would no longer be accepting advertising from fossil fuel companies and carbon-based energy corporations. *Guardian* media editor Jim Waterson explained, "The Guardian will no longer accept advertising from oil and gas companies, becoming the first major global news organisation to institute an outright ban on taking money from companies that extract fossil fuels. The move, which

14 <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/23/799047659/the-end-may-be-nearer-doomsday-clock-moves-within-100-seconds-of-midnight>

15 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51213185>



follows efforts to reduce the company's carbon footprint and increase reporting on the climate emergency, was announced on Wednesday and will be implemented with immediate effect. The ban will apply to any business primarily involved in extracting fossil fuels, including many of the world's largest polluters...Environmental groups have long argued that energy companies use expensive advertising campaigns to "greenwash" their activities, paying to highlight relatively small investments in renewable energy while continuing to make the vast majority of their revenue from extracting fossil fuels. They have called for news outlets to reject such advertising, although until now only a handful of small outlets have adopted this approach. Last year, the editor-in-chief, Katharine Viner, announced the Guardian would adjust its style guide to represent the scale of the environmental challenge facing the Earth, using terms such as "climate emergency" and "global heating" rather than "climate change" and "global warming". At a corporate level, the company has emphasised its commitment to becoming carbon-neutral by 2030, while also almost entirely divesting its Scott Trust endowment fund from fossil fuel investments. The decision to reject the advertising money from fossil fuel firms comes at a tricky time for the media industry, with the Guardian Media Group board warning the business is facing substantial headwinds this year. Advertising makes up 40% of GMG revenue, meaning it remains a key way to fund the journalism produced by Guardian and Observer journalists around the world".<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, *Washington Post* journalist Kim Bellware reported, "Anna Bateson, the Guardian's acting chief executive, and Hamish Nicklin, chief revenue officer, said in a joint statement that the move was driven, in part, by their newspaper's reporting on the urgency of climate change and a need to be true to the company's values – particularly, they said, as fossil fuel companies continue to use their power to influence policies that harm the planet. "Our decision is based on the decades-long efforts by many in that industry to prevent meaningful climate action by governments around the world," Bateson and Nicklin said. The changes to the

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jan/29/guardian-to-ban-advertising-from-fossil-fuel-firms-climate-crisis>

Record high ocean temperatures generated media interest, stemming from a study published in *Advances in Atmospheric Sciences* with findings that the past decades have been the warmest on record for the world's oceans while the rate of ocean warming has **increased 500%** in the last four decades.

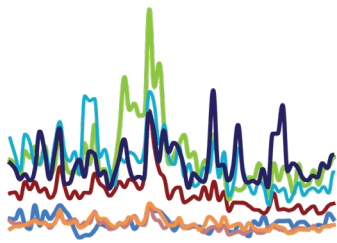


Guardian's advertising policies come amid a larger shift in editorial vision when related to reporting on what it refers to as the "climate crisis." The organization updated its style guide in October to say it would use the terms "climate emergency" or "climate crisis" as "Climate change is no longer considered to accurately reflect the seriousness of the overall situation." Similarly, Guardian photo editors announced a change to how such stories are represented visually and signaled an end to images such as a lonely polar bear on a glacier in favor of ones that more clearly and accurately reflect the urgency and human cost of the crisis".<sup>17</sup>

Thanks for your ongoing interest in our efforts to monitor and analyze media coverage across 113 sources in 55 countries around the world. If you missed it, check out our '2019 year in review' we published at the beginning of 2020. To help us further expand our work and improve our analyses, consider donating to the Media and Climate Change Observatory by following this link: <https://giving.cu.edu/fund/media-and-climate-change-observatory-mecco>.

- report prepared by **Max Boykoff, Jennifer Katzung and Ami Nacu-Schmidt**

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/01/29/guardian-fossil-fuel-advertising>



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Media and Climate Change Observatory

# MONTHLY SUMMARIES

ISSUE 37, JANUARY 2020



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MeCCO monitors 113 sources (across newspapers, radio and TV) in 55 countries in seven different regions around the world. MeCCO assembles the data by accessing archives through the Lexis Nexis, Proquest and Factiva databases via the University of Colorado libraries. These sources are selected through a decision processes involving weighting of three main factors:



**Geographical  
Diversity**

**favoring a greater geographical range**



**Circulation**

**favoring higher circulating publications**



**Reliable Access to  
Archives Over Time**

**favoring those accessible consistently  
for longer periods of time**

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[http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/media\\_coverage](http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/media_coverage)