

“The planet is on “red alert” because governments are failing to meet their climate change goals”



Emissions from a coal-fired power plant are silhouetted against the setting sun in Independence, Missouri, on Feb. 1, 2021. Photo: Charlie Riedel/AP.

February is always a short month. In our summaries, we compare month-to-month and year-to-year coverage rather than articles or segments per day. That can slightly skew interpretations of ebbs and flows compared to previous months (January 2021). That said, with our open-source databases posted each month, we welcome readers to download

those sources and run other analyses such as number of articles per day in certain places (e.g. Japan) and comparing them then to other days or weeks or other places (e.g. Australia) across our multi-year databases that our twenty-five member Media and Climate Change (MeCCO) team around the world provide each month. With that in mind, our MeCCO team detected

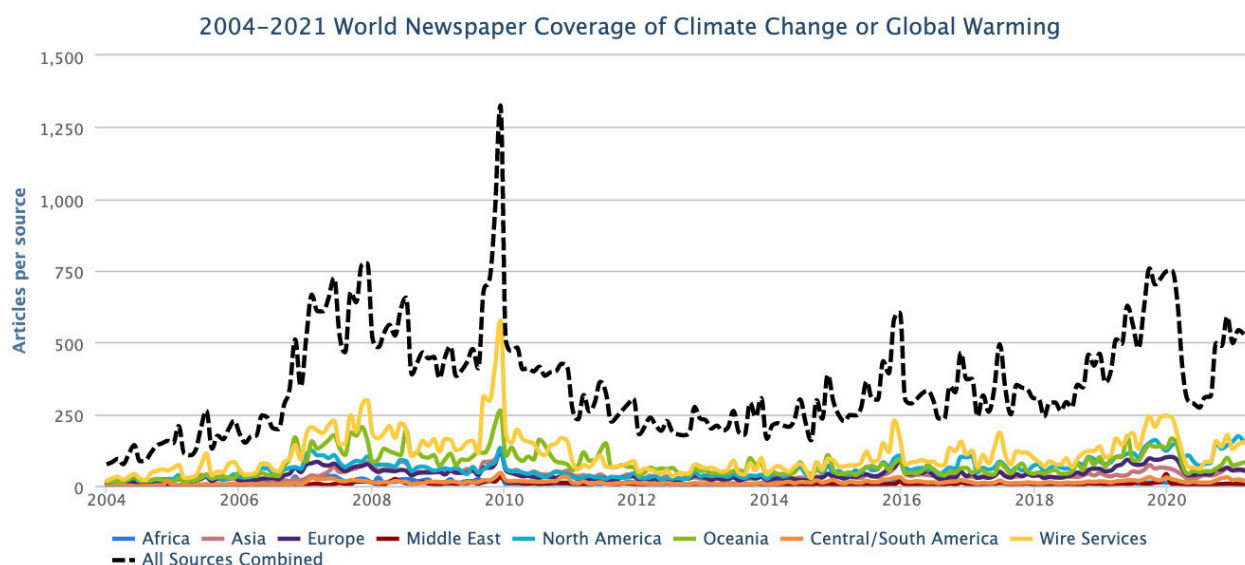


Figure 1. Newspaper media coverage of climate change or global warming in print sources in seven different regions around the world, from January 2004 through February 2021.

2000–2021 US Television Coverage of Climate Change or Global Warming

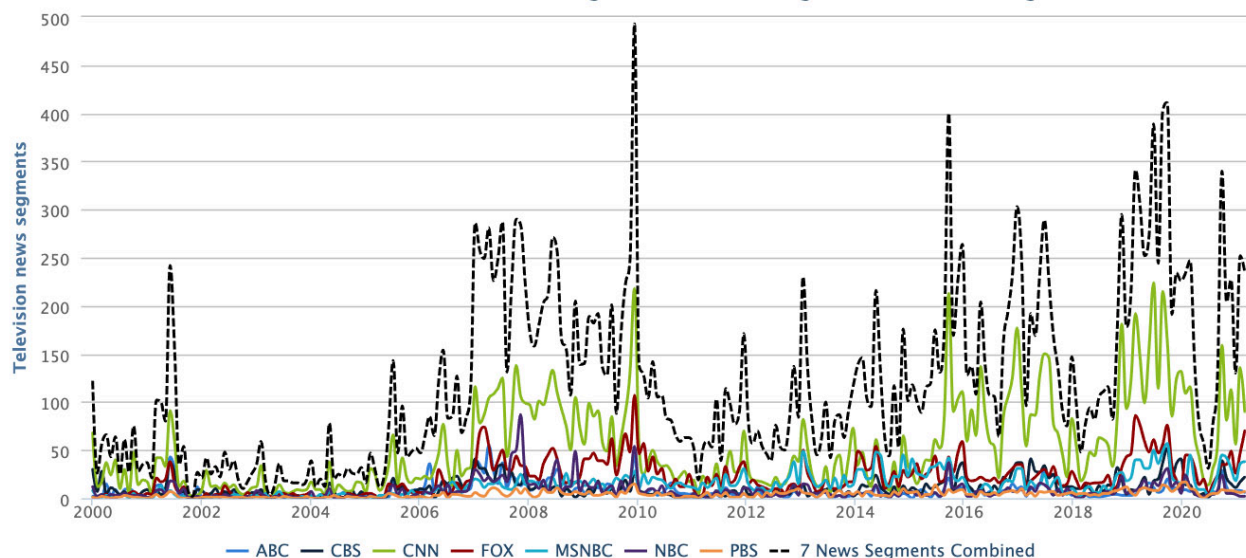


Figure 2. US television media coverage of climate change or global warming in ABC News, CBS News, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, NBC News and PBS Newshour from January 2000 through January 2021.

that in February 2021, media coverage of climate change or global warming around the world decreased 21% from January 2021. February 2021 levels were 3% lower than coverage in leap-year February 2020 but is up 28% from the levels of coverage two years earlier (February 2019). A year ago, February 2020 was a time when we were on the precipice of media coverage of climate change dropping off dramatically in March 2020, largely due to media and public attention shifting significantly to the emergent COVID-19 pandemic. That said, as the climate has continued to change in the interim year, media attention still has not recovered to those pre-pandemic monthly levels at the global scale. 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 2021.

Yet, there were variations in this overall trend. Media coverage of climate change or global warming on radio outlets increased 10% from January 2021 and increased 58% from February 2020. Coverage across international wires services was up 4% from January 2021 levels, but still 15% lower than February 2020. Swedish print media coverage was up 39% in February compared to the previous month and up 2% compared to the previous year (February 2020). Similarly, print coverage in India increased 59%

compared to January 2021 and increased 11% compared to February 2020.

Elsewhere, coverage diminished in places like the United States (US) where print coverage dropped 5% from the previous month and 15% from February 2020, and television coverage fell 6% from January 2021 and 4% from February 2020. As another example, in February 2021 United Kingdom print coverage was down 10% from January 2021 and down 41% from February 2020.

Many *political* and *economic* themed media stories ran in February about climate change or global warming. To begin, when the US Biden Administration officially rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement in February, media coverage abounded. For example, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Andrew Restuccia explained, “The U.S. officially rejoined the Paris climate change agreement on Friday as President Biden puts environmental policy at the center of his agenda and prepares to work with world leaders to cut global greenhouse gas emissions. On his first day in office last month Mr. Biden took an initial step toward rejoining the global accord, which was a signature achievement of former President Barack Obama and from which former President Donald Trump subsequently withdrew. Under the agreement’s rules, a country can formally re-enter the pact 30 days after it gives notice to



Figure 3. Front pages in French newspapers *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *l'Humanité* in February 2021.

the United Nations. Friday marks the end of that 30-day period". Meanwhile, [NBC News journalist Josh Lederman added](#), "For four years, the rest of the world watched with frustration and a sense of irony as the U.S. walked away from the Paris Agreement, the global climate pact it had painstakingly pressured other countries to join and then abruptly abandoned during the Trump administration. Starting Friday, the U.S. is back in the deal but with plenty of catching up to do to meet its emissions-cutting commitments and restore its diminished standing on the world stage".

Also in February, when countries submitted their progress reports and updated greenhouse gas emissions reductions goals in the lead up to the next United Nations climate negotiations in November 2021 (in Glasgow, Scotland), media outlets took note. For example, [CNN journalist Eoin McSweeney and Hannah Ritchie reported](#), "The planet is on "red alert" because governments are failing to meet their climate change goals, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said Friday. He described 2021 as a "make or break year" following the release of a UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) report analyzing the updated climate action plans submitted by 75 nations ahead of November's COP26 climate summit which found that current policies won't come close to meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement". Meanwhile, [Washington Post correspondent Brady Dennis noted](#), "The U.N. analysis comes as presidents and prime ministers face pressure to ramp up the promises they made as part of the Paris climate accord in 2015. Through the end of last year, roughly 75 countries representing about 30 percent of global emissions had updated their initial plans ahead of a key U.N. climate summit

this fall in Scotland. But so far, U.N. officials reported Friday, those more ambitious pledges are hardly ambitious enough. Even if countries follow through, their combined impacts would put the world on a path to achieve only a 1 percent reduction in global emissions by 2030, compared to 2010 levels. By contrast, scientists have said that emissions must fall by nearly 50 percent this decade for the world to realistically have a shot at avoiding devastating temperature rise". Furthermore, [Associated Press journalist Seth Borenstein added](#), "The newest pledges by countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions are falling far short of what's needed to limit global warming to what the Paris climate accord seeks, a new United Nations report finds. So the U.N.'s climate chief is telling nations to go back and try harder". And [reporting from the Asahi Shimbun](#) in Japan assessed the government's ongoing goals.

Relating to these political and economic themes, in February many [cultural](#) stories circulated about climate change or global warming. For example, the tragedies in the US state of Texas regarding a cold snap and loss of electricity generated tremendous media attention. A significant subset of that reporting explored links between the weather pattern and a changing climate. For example, [Washington Post journalists Andrew Freedman, Matthew Cappucci, Kim Bellware and Meryl Kornfield reported](#), "The central United States is currently the most unusually cold region on the planet, with temperatures reaching 50 degrees below average in some areas. However, the planet as a whole is still unusually mild, and 2020 was on par with the previous record for the warmest year on record. As the climate has warmed due to human activities, cold snaps have become increasingly rare and less severe, while

heat waves have become far more common and intense”.¹ Furthermore, **Robert Reich wrote in *The Guardian***, “Like the poor across America and much of the world, poor Texans are getting hammered by climate change. Many inhabit substandard homes, lacking proper insulation. The very poor occupy trailers or tents, or camp out in their cars. Lower-income communities are located close to refineries and other industrial sites that release added pollutants when they shut or restart. In Texas, for-profit energy companies have no incentive to prepare for extreme weather or maintain spare capacity. Even if they’re able to handle surges in demand, prices go through the roof and poorer households are hit hard. If they can’t pay, they’re cut off. Rich Texans take spikes in energy prices in their stride. If the electric grid goes down, private generators kick in. In a pinch – as last week – they check into hotels or leave town. On Wednesday night, as millions of his constituents remained without power and heat, Senator Ted Cruz flew to Cancún, Mexico for a family vacation. Their Houston home was “FREEZING” – as his wife put it. Climate change, Covid-19 and jobs are together splitting Americans by class more profoundly than Americans are split by politics. The white working class is taking as much of a beating as most Black and Latino people...Texans froze because deregulation and a profit-driven free market created an electric grid utterly unprepared for climate change. In Texas, oil tycoons are the only winners from climate change. Everyone else is losing badly. Adapting to extreme weather is necessary but it’s no substitute for cutting emissions, which Texas is loath to do. Not even the Lone Star state should protect the freedom to freeze”.²

Also connected to these stories noted above, in February **ecological** and **meteorological** dimensions of climate change and global warming were evident. For instance, wildfires in Perth, Australia garnered media attention. For example, **BBC News reported**, “Hundreds of Australians have fled to evacuation centres as
1 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/02/15/texas-oklahoma-record-cold/>
2 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/21/texas-freeze-greg-abbott-ted-cruz-oil-gas-green-new-deal>

a bushfire on the outskirts of the locked-down city of Perth continues to grow and threaten communities. The blaze - the largest the city has seen in years - has burnt through 9,000 hectares, destroying 71 homes. Six firefighters have suffered injuries...deputy fire commissioner Craig Waters said the area had not seen such large fires historically but “in the last few years, we have seen increased fire behaviour with rapid escalation overnight. The changing climate... and moisture deficit in the soil is impacting how the fire behaves”.

And scientific stories about climate change or global warming continued to make up part of the many stories in February. For example, a **study** tracing the links between fossil fuel burning and pre-mature deaths around the world generated attention. For example, **Guardian journalist Oliver Millman reported**, “Air pollution caused by the burning of fossil fuels such as coal and oil was responsible for 8.7m deaths globally in 2018, a staggering one in five of all people who died that year, new research has found. Countries with the most prodigious consumption of fossil fuels to power factories, homes and vehicles are suffering the highest death tolls, with the study finding more than one in 10 deaths in both the US and Europe were caused by the resulting pollution, along with nearly a third of deaths in eastern Asia, which includes China. Death rates in South America and Africa were significantly lower”.

Another **study** that generated media coverage examined how the pollen allergy season has been changed by the burning of fossil fuels and consequent climate change. For example, **Associated Press reporter Seth Borenstein noted**, “When Dr. Stanley Fineman started as an allergist in Atlanta, he told patients they should start taking their medications and prepare for the drippy, sneezy onslaught of pollen season around St. Patrick’s Day. That was about 40 years ago. Now he tells them to start around St. Valentine’s Day. Across the United States and Canada, pollen season is starting 20 days earlier and pollen loads are 21% higher since 1990 and a huge chunk of that is because of global warming... While other studies have shown North America’s



Thank you for your ongoing interest in the work we do through MeCCO. We remain committed to our work monitoring media coverage of these intersecting dimensions and themes associated with climate change.

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allergy season getting longer and worse, this is the most comprehensive data with 60 reporting stations and the first to make the required and detailed calculations that could attribute what's happening to human-caused climate change".³ Meanwhile, *USA Today* correspondent Doyle Rice wrote, "Allergies to airborne pollen can be more than just a seasonal nuisance to many. Allergies are tied to respiratory health and have implications for viral infections, emergency room visits and even children's school performance, according to a statement from the University of Utah. More pollen, hanging around for a longer season, makes those impacts worse. Climate change has two broad effects, according to the

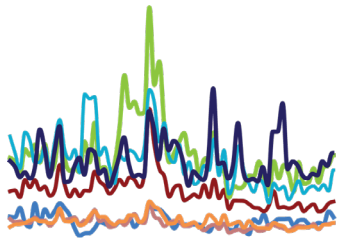
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³ https://apnews.com/article/pollen-season-starts-february-3ada37b21b5ff6ffaf3fa22bbc61a743_

study. First, it shifts pollen seasons earlier and lengthens their duration. Second, it increases the pollen concentrations in the air so pollen seasons are, on average, worse".⁴

Thanks for your ongoing interest in our Media and Climate Change Observatory (MeCCO) work monitoring media coverage of these intersecting dimensions and themes associated with climate change.

- report prepared by Max Boykoff, Midori Aoyagi, Rogelio Fernández-Reyes, Jennifer Katzung, Ami Nacu-Schmidt and Olivia Pearman

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⁴ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/02/08/climate-change-worsening-and-lengthening-pollen-season/4437359001/>



MeCCO

Media and Climate Change Observatory

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MeCCO monitors 120 sources (across newspapers, radio and TV) in 54 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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