

Television has less effect on education about climate change than other forms of media

Worried about climate change and want to learn more? You probably aren't watching television then. A new study by George Mason University Communication Professor Xiaoquan Zhao suggests that watching television has no significant impact on viewers' knowledge about the issue of climate change. Reading newspapers and using the web, however, seem to contribute to people's knowledge about this issue.

The study, "Media Use and Global Warming Perceptions: A Snapshot of the Reinforcing Spirals", looked at the relationship between media use and people's perceptions of global warming. The study asked participants how often they watch TV, surf the Web, and read newspapers. They were also asked about their concern and knowledge of global warming and specifically its impact on the polar regions.

"Unlike many other social issues with which the public may have first-hand experience, global warming is an issue that many come to learn about through the media," says Zhao. "The primary source of mediated information about global warming is the news."

The results showed that people who read newspapers and use the Internet more often are more likely to be concerned about global warming and believe they are better educated about the subject. Watching more television, however, did not seem to help.

He also found that individuals concerned about global warming are more likely to seek out information on this issue from a variety of media and nonmedia sources. Other forms of media, such as the Oscar-winning documentary "The Inconvenient Truth" and the blockbuster thriller "The Day After Tomorrow," have played important roles in advancing the public's interest in this domain.

Politics also seemed to have an influence on people's perceptions about the science of global warming. Republicans are more likely to believe that scientists are still debating the existence and human causes of global warming, whereas Democrats are more likely to believe that a scientific consensus has already been achieved on these matters.

"Some media forms have clear influence on people's perceived knowledge of global warming, and most of it seems positive," says Zhao. "Future research should focus on how to harness this powerful educational function."

Source: George Mason University

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