



A National Survey Of News Directors About Climate Change: Preliminary Findings

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http://www.climatechangecommunication.org/resources_reports.cfm

Methods

From January to March 2010, using a web-based method, we surveyed all television news directors who were current members of the Radio and Television Digital News Association (RTDNA), a professional association for news directors. To invite their members to participate, on the first day of the survey period, RTDNA sent an invitation email which included a link to the web-based survey. One week later, they sent a reminder email that also included a link to the survey. They also featured a reminder notice in two sequential issues of the RTDNA electronic newsletter.

In total, 433 news directors were invited to participate, and 79 participated in the survey. Thus, the unadjusted response rate was 18.2%. No adjustments were made to the response rate because we did not have access to information that would allow for corrections to the size of the denominator (i.e., due to ineligibility or incorrect email addresses), or to estimate ineligibility rate among non-respondents.

Low response rates do not necessarily indicate inaccuracy in the data. In fact, the American Association of Public Opinion Research states that response rates do not necessarily differentiate reliably between accurate and inaccurate data,¹ and current research indicates that surveys with lower response rates, on average, are only minimally less accurate than surveys with dramatically higher response rates.² That notwithstanding, due to the low response rate to our survey, and to our inability to compare respondents to non-respondents on demographic or other variables, we urge readers to use caution in interpreting our findings.

¹“Response Rates – An Overview.” American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). 29 Sept 2008. <http://www.aapor.org/responseratesanoverview>

² Holbrook, A, Krosnick, J. & Pfent, A. 2007. The Causes and Consequences of Response Rates in Surveys by the News Media and Government Contractor Survey Research Firms. In *Advances in telephone survey methodology*, ed. James M. Lepkowski, N. Clyde Tucker, J. Michael Brick, Edith D. De Leeuw, Lilli Japac, Paul J. Lavrakas, Michael W. Link, and Roberta L. Sangster. New York: Wiley

Summary of Findings and Interpretation

Television news directors are interested in running science stories, but few have staff dedicated to this beat. Nearly three quarters of news directors say their station reports on science issues once a month or more frequently, and almost half say they would like to report on science issues more frequently in the future. Only 10% of news directors, however, say they have a full time science or environmental reporter. This 10% figure is consistent with the estimates given by weathercasters¹ and environment reporters² in other surveys.

Two thirds of news directors support an expanded role for their weathercasters, that of “station scientist” who reports on a wider range of science topics beyond weather forecasting. Perhaps not surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of news directors (92%) want their weathercasters to have meteorology degrees.

Climate change is covered relatively infrequently on local TV news; fewer than half of news directors (44%) say their station reports on climate change once a month or more frequently. The majority of news directors (65%) say they will cover climate change stories at about the same frequency in the future, although 29% indicate they intend to cover the issue more frequently.

Most news directors are comfortable with their weathercasters reporting on climate science. The majority of news directors feel it is appropriate for their weathercasters to discuss the science of climate change on-air (68%), on-line (73%), and in community speaking events (70%). These numbers are similar to those reported by TV weathercasters themselves.¹

Relatively few TV news directors (28%) say they have experienced obstacles to reporting on climate change. For those who identified obstacles, the most common were: perceived scientific uncertainty about climate change (27%), complexity of the subject (26%), difficulty finding a local angle (25%), and lack of time for field reporting (24%). About 20% say lack of viewer support, lack of access to trusted scientific information, and lack of access to appropriate visuals/graphics are obstacles to reporting climate change. Less than 3% perceive pressure from advertisers, or from station owners, as obstacles to climate change coverage.

News directors say a wide variety of resources would be helpful in increasing their newsroom’s ability to report on climate change. Nearly all say additional training and education for their weathercasters (89%), and their news staff (92%), would be beneficial. Additionally, access to climate scientists for on camera interviews (87%), access to high quality graphics/animations to use on-air (86%), access to peer-reviewed journals (79%), and access to PowerPoint presentations to use in public speaking events (56%) are considered valuable resources by a majority of respondents.

¹Maibach E, Wilson K, Witte J. (2010) Television meteorologists and climate change: A national survey. George Mason University. Fairfax, VA: Center for Climate Change Communication. Available at: http://www.climatechangecommunication.org/resources_reports.cfm

²Sachsman, D. B., Simon, J. & Valenti, J. (2008). Environment reporters and U.S. journalists: A comparative analysis. *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*, 7(1), 1-19. doi:10.1080/15330150802194862.

News directors say they are interested in having their station cover a wide range of local climate change stories. At the top of that list are extreme precipitation and/or flooding events (78%), droughts and water shortages (77%), impacts on air quality (69%) and human health (69%), extreme heat events (68%) and impacts on local flora and fauna (59%). Relatively few (16%) news directors say they've already seen evidence of climate change in their local weather patterns, although 51% responded that they "don't know."

News directors express varying degrees of trust in sources of information about climate change. The most trusted sources of climate change information are the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (92%), the National Weather Association (87%), the AMS (86%), state climatologists (86%), "my own TV weathercasters" (86%), climate scientists (77%) and peer-reviewed journals (77%). News directors express considerably more trust in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (66%) than do TV weathercasters (44%).¹ News directors also trust their own TV weathercasters much more than they trust other television weathercasters (59%). The least trusted source of climate change information are politicians (14%) and religious leaders (24%).

News directors hold a wide range of beliefs about global warming. The survey assessed beliefs in and attitudes about "global warming" with questions that have been used previously in other public opinion research. More than half of news directors (53%) say that global warming is happening, 21% say it isn't, and 26% say they don't know yet. Just over half say global warming is caused mostly by human activities (52%), while a third say it is caused mostly by natural changes in the environment (34%). Most news directors say they have thought a lot about global warming (82%) and are well informed about the different causes of global warming (83%). Somewhat fewer, however, feel well informed about the different consequences of global warming (69%) and the ways in which we can reduce global warming (66%). More than half say they need "some more information" (32%) or "a lot more information" (22%) in order to form a firm opinion on global warming, and more than a quarter say they could easily change their mind about the issue. Nearly two thirds of news directors say the U.S. should reduce its greenhouse gas emissions regardless of what other countries do (64%) and nearly three quarters say citizens should be doing "more" (64%) or "much more" (7%) to address global warming.

TV news directors appear less skeptical about the science of climate change than are TV weathercasters, although many still question the scientific consensus. Only 15% of news directors (as compared to 27% of TV weathercasters) agree with the statement made by a prominent TV weathercaster: "global warming is a scam." Over half (58%) say "there is a lot of disagreement among scientists about whether or not global warming is happening," while 41% say "most scientists think global warming is happening" (compared to one third of weathercasters).

Despite the scientific consensus that climate change is happening and is human-caused, nearly all news directors (90%) believe that, like coverage of other issues, coverage of climate change must reflect a "balance" of viewpoints. Covering climate change stories, however, with such ersatz balance can have serious negative repercussions for public understanding of the subject.^{3,4}

³Boykoff, M.T. (2009) We speak for the trees: Media reporting on the environment. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 34:431-57. doi:10.1146/annurev.enviro.051308.084254

⁴Malka, A., Krosnick, J. Debell, M., Pasek, J, Scheider D. (2009) Featuring skeptics in news media stories about global warming reduces public beliefs in seriousness of global warming. Working paper available at: <http://woods.stanford.edu/research/global-warming-skeptics.html>

Detailed Findings

NOTE: All results show percentages among all respondents, unless otherwise labeled. Totals may occasionally sum to more than 100 percent due to rounding.

1. How many full-time weathercasters work for your station?

<i>One</i>	<i>6.3</i>
<i>Two</i>	<i>17.7</i>
<i>Three</i>	<i>45.6</i>
<i>Four</i>	<i>25.3</i>
<i>More than four</i>	<i>5.1</i>

n=79

2. Does your station have a full-time science or environment reporter?

<i>Yes</i>	<i>10.1</i>
<i>No</i>	<i>89.9</i>

n=79

3. How often does your station report on climate change each month?

<i>Never</i>	<i>5.1</i>
<i>Less than once a month</i>	<i>50.6</i>
<i>1-2 times a month</i>	<i>29.1</i>
<i>3-4 times a month</i>	<i>11.4</i>
<i>5 times a month or more</i>	<i>3.8</i>

n=79

4. In the future, would you like your station to report on climate change issues less frequently, more frequently, or about the same as now?

<i>Less frequently</i>	6.3
<i>About the same</i>	64.6
<i>More frequently</i>	29.1

n=79

5. How often does your station report on science issues other than climate change (e.g., air and water quality, astronomy) each month?

<i>Never</i>	0.0
<i>Less than once a month</i>	17.7
<i>1-2 times a month</i>	44.3
<i>3-4 times a month</i>	17.7
<i>5 times a month or more</i>	20.3

n=79

6. In the future would you like to report on science issues other than climate change :

<i>Less frequently</i>	0.0
<i>About the same</i>	56.4
<i>More frequently</i>	43.6

n=78

7. For the following statements, please indicate your response to each ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing
<i>It is appropriate for my TV weathercasters to discuss the science of climate change on-air.</i>	16.9	50.6	14.3	13.0	5.2	(2)
<i>It is appropriate for my TV weathercasters to discuss the science of climate change on-line.</i>	18.2	54.5	15.6	6.5	5.2	(2)
<i>It is appropriate for my TV weathercasters to discuss the science of climate change in community speaking events.</i>	14.5	55.3	17.1	7.9	5.3	(3)
<i>My TV weathercasters should have meteorology degrees.</i>	65.8	26.3	5.3	2.6	0.0	(3)
<i>My TV weathercasters should have the American Meteorological Society Seal of Approval.</i>	34.7	33.3	22.7	5.3	4.0	(4)
<i>How do you feel about the statement: "Global warming is a scam."</i>	8.0	6.7	38.7	32.0	14.7	(4)
<i>There is an AMS effort to make TV weathercasters the science expert in the newsroom. Respond to this statement: "I am comfortable having my TV weathercasters serve as 'station scientists'."</i>	25.7	39.2	16.2	14.9	4.1	(5)
<i>Coverage of climate change science must reflect a "balance" of viewpoints just as coverage of political or social issues should.</i>	46.1	43.4	2.6	7.9	0.0	(3)

n=79

8. As a news director, have you ever experienced any obstacles to reporting on climate change?

<i>Yes, I have frequently experienced obstacles to reporting on climate change</i>	4.0
<i>Yes, I have occasionally experienced obstacles to reporting on climate change</i>	24.0
<i>No, I haven't experienced obstacles to reporting on climate change</i>	65.3
<i>Don't know</i>	6.7

n=75

9. How important are the following obstacles for you currently in reporting on climate change?	<i>A very important obstacle</i>	<i>A somewhat important obstacle</i>	<i>Not an obstacle</i>	<i>Missing</i>
<i>Lack of time in the newscast</i>	6.3	7.6	18.9	(1)
<i>Lack of time for field reporting</i>	11.4	12.6	10.1	(0)
<i>Difficulty finding a local angle</i>	7.6	17.7	8.9	(0)
<i>Pressure from advertisers</i>	1.3	1.3	31.6	(0)
<i>Pressure from station ownership</i>	1.3	0.0	32.9	(0)
<i>Lack of viewer support (i.e., negative reactions by viewers)</i>	6.3	13.9	12.6	(1)
<i>Lack of access to trusted scientific information</i>	7.5	13.9	12.6	(0)
<i>Lack of access to appropriate visuals/graphics to use in reporting</i>	5.1	16.4	12.6	(0)
<i>Scientific uncertainty about climate change</i>	8.9	17.7	7.6	(0)
<i>Too complex a subject to cover adequately</i>	15.2	13.9	5.1	(0)

n=27 (Skipped if answer to question 8 was "no"). However, for ease in interpretation, the percentages in the table were calculated using n=79 as the denominator.

10. How helpful would the following resources be in increasing your newsroom's ability to report on climate change?

	<i>Very Helpful</i>	<i>Somewhat Helpful</i>	<i>Not Helpful</i>
<i>Additional training and education for my TV weathercasters</i>	48.6	40.5	10.8
<i>Additional training and education for my news staff</i>	45.3	46.7	8.0
<i>Access to climate scientists for on camera interviews</i>	42.7	44.0	13.3
<i>Access to high-quality graphics/animations to use on-air</i>	44.6	41.9	13.5
<i>Access to peer-reviewed science journals</i>	22.7	56.0	21.3
<i>Access to PowerPoint presentations to use in public speaking events</i>	11.0	47.9	41.1

n=75

11. What kinds of local climate change stories would you like to report on in your community? (check all that apply)

<i>Extreme heat events</i>	74.6
<i>Hurricanes</i>	37.3
<i>Extreme precipitation and/or flooding</i>	86.6
<i>Droughts and water shortages</i>	85.3
<i>Impact on crop & livestock production</i>	70.6
<i>Impact on air quality</i>	76.0
<i>Sea-level rise and storm surge</i>	22.6
<i>Forest fires</i>	50.6
<i>Impact on local wildlife (i.e., animals, plants)</i>	65.3
<i>Impact on human health (e.g., mosquito-borne disease water-borne disease)</i>	76.0

n=75

12. Have you seen any evidence of climate change in your local weather patterns?

<i>Yes</i>	16.0
<i>No</i>	33.3
<i>Don't know</i>	50.7

n=75

13. How much do you trust or distrust the following as a source of information about climate change?

	<i>Strongly distrust</i>	<i>Somewhat distrust</i>	<i>Somewhat trust</i>	<i>Strongly trust</i>	<i>Missing</i>
<i>Climate scientists</i>	8.2	15.1	53.4	23.3	(6)
<i>Peer-reviewed science journals</i>	5.7	17.1	52.9	24.3	(9)
<i>AMS Conferences/meetings</i>	5.7	8.6	60.0	25.7	(9)
<i>NWA Conferences/meetings</i>	5.7	7.1	64.3	22.9	(9)
<i>Mainstream news media sources</i>	11.0	31.5	53.4	4.1	(6)
<i>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change</i>	12.7	21.1	54.9	11.3	(8)
<i>NOAA/NWS</i>	5.5	2.7	63.0	28.8	(6)
<i>State climatologists</i>	5.5	8.2	65.8	20.5	(6)
<i>My television weathercasters</i>	4.2	9.7	54.2	31.9	(7)
<i>Other television weathercasters</i>	11.3	29.6	52.1	7.0	(8)
<i>Political leaders</i>	47.2	38.9	13.9	0.0	(7)
<i>Religious leaders</i>	40.3	36.1	22.2	1.4	(7)

n=79

14. Would you air professionally produced, scientifically reviewed, brief reports on climate change that your station could customize for your viewing audience?

<i>Yes</i>	20.8
<i>No</i>	44.4
<i>Don't Know</i>	34.7

n=72

15. Research has shown that, regarding attitudes about climate change, there are six distinct groups of Americans. Please estimate – totaling to 100% -- what proportion of your viewers fall into each of these six attitudinal categories.

	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Alarmed (people who are very certain that climate change is real and are changing their behavior)</i>	10.4
<i>Concerned (people who are certain that climate change is real, but aren't doing much about it)</i>	16.2
<i>Cautious (people who tend to believe that climate change is real, but they aren't completely certain)</i>	17.9
<i>Disengaged (people who haven't given it much thought and don't have an opinion about it)</i>	22.2
<i>Doubtful (people who tend to doubt that climate change is real, but aren't certain)</i>	15.9
<i>Dismissive (people who are very certain that climate change is not real)</i>	17.3

n=70

The following questions refer to “global warming” rather than “climate change” because they are questions that have been asked previously in public opinion surveys.

16. What do you think? Do you think that global warming is happening? How sure are you?

Yes		52.8
<i>Extremely sure</i>	12.5	
<i>Very sure</i>	19.6	
<i>Somewhat sure</i>	37.5	
<i>Not at all sure</i>	30.4	
Don't know		26.4
No		20.8
<i>Not at all sure</i>	13.3	
<i>Somewhat sure</i>	20.0	
<i>Very sure</i>	53.3	
<i>Extremely sure</i>	13.3	

n=72

17. Assuming global warming is happening, do you think it is ...

<i>Caused mostly by human activities</i>	52.2
<i>Caused mostly by natural changes in the environment</i>	34.3
<i>None of the above because global warming isn't happening</i>	7.5
<i>Other</i>	5.9

n=67

18. How worried are you about global warming?

<i>Very worried</i>	5.6
<i>Somewhat worried</i>	50.7
<i>Not very worried</i>	31.0
<i>Not at all worried</i>	12.7

n=71

19. How much do you think global warming will harm you personally?

<i>Not at all</i>	30.6
<i>Only a little</i>	25.0
<i>A moderate amount</i>	22.2
<i>A great deal</i>	4.2
<i>Don't know</i>	18.1

n=72

20. When do you think global warming will start to harm people in the United States?

<i>They are being harmed now</i>	15.6
<i>In 10 years</i>	9.4
<i>In 25 years</i>	23.4
<i>In 50 years</i>	12.5
<i>In 100 years</i>	17.2
<i>Never</i>	21.9

n=64

21. How much do you think global warming will harm future generations of people?

<i>Not at all</i>	18.5
<i>Only a little</i>	18.5
<i>A moderate amount</i>	36.9
<i>A great deal</i>	26.2

n=65

22. How much had you thought about global warming before today?

<i>Not at all</i>	1.4
<i>Only a little</i>	16.7
<i>A moderate amount</i>	62.5
<i>A great deal</i>	19.4

n=72

23. How important is the issue of global warming to you personally?

<i>Not at all important</i>	5.6
<i>Not too important</i>	28.2
<i>Somewhat important</i>	47.9
<i>Very important</i>	11.3
<i>Extremely important</i>	7.0

n=71

24. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “I could easily change my mind about global warming.”

<i>Strongly agree</i>	4.2
<i>Agree</i>	22.2
<i>Neutral</i>	25.0
<i>Disagree</i>	30.6
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	18.1

n=72

25. How many of your friends share your views on global warming?

<i>None</i>	0.0
<i>A few</i>	22.4
<i>Some</i>	41.8
<i>Most</i>	32.8
<i>All</i>	3.0

n=67

26. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

<i>Global warming isn't happening</i>	11.4
<i>Humans can't reduce global warming, even if it is happening</i>	15.7
<i>Humans could reduce global warming, but people aren't willing to change their behavior, so we're not going to</i>	15.7
<i>Humans could reduce global warming, but it's unclear at this point whether we will do what's needed</i>	52.9
<i>Humans can reduce global warming, and we are going to do so successfully</i>	4.3

n=70

27. Do you think citizens themselves should be doing more or less to address global warming?

<i>Much less</i>	4.3
<i>Less</i>	7.1
<i>Currently doing the right amount</i>	17.1
<i>More</i>	64.3
<i>Much more</i>	7.1

n=70

28. Over the past 12 months, how many times have you punished companies that are opposing steps to reduce global warming by NOT buying their products?

<i>Never</i>	84.3
<i>Once</i>	1.4
<i>A few times (2 or 3)</i>	2.9
<i>Several times (4 or 5)</i>	8.6
<i>Many times (6 or more)</i>	1.4
<i>Don't know</i>	1.4

n=70

29. Do you think global warming should be a low, medium, high, or very high priority for the President and Congress?

<i>Low</i>	33.3
<i>Medium</i>	44.4
<i>High</i>	18.1
<i>Very high</i>	4.2

n=72

30. People disagree whether the United States should reduce greenhouse gas emissions on its own, or make reductions only if other countries do too. Which of the following statements comes closest to your own point of view? The United States should reduce its greenhouse gas emissions...

<i>Regardless of what other countries do</i>	63.9
<i>Only if other industrialized countries (such as England, Germany and Japan) reduce their emissions</i>	2.8
<i>Only if other industrialized countries and developing countries (such as China, India and Brazil) reduce their emissions</i>	11.1
<i>The US should not reduce its emissions</i>	13.9
<i>Don't know</i>	8.3

n=72

31. Personally, how well informed do you feel you are about...

	<i>Not at all informed</i>	<i>Not very well informed</i>	<i>Fairly well informed</i>	<i>Very well informed</i>
The different causes of global warming	0.0	26.8	54.9	18.3
The different consequences of global warming	1.4	28.2	53.5	16.9
Ways in which we can reduce global warming	0.0	33.8	52.1	14.1

n=71

32. On some issues people feel that they have all the information they need in order to form a firm opinion, while on other issues they would like more information before making up their mind. For global warming, where would you place yourself?

I need a lot more information	22.2
I need some more information	31.9
I need a little more information	25.0
I do not need any more information	20.8

n=72

33. Which of the following statements comes closer to your own view?

Most scientists think global warming is happening	40.8
Most scientists think global warming is not happening	1.4
There is a lot of disagreement among scientists about whether or not global warming is happening	57.7
Don't know enough to say	0.0

n=71

34. Have you heard anything in the news recently about controversial emails between climate scientists in England and the US? Some news organizations have called the release of these emails "Climategate."

Yes	76.4
No	16.7
Don't know	6.9

n=72

35. How closely have you followed the news stories about the controversial emails?

<i>Very closely</i>	20.0
<i>Somewhat closely</i>	32.7
<i>A little</i>	40.0
<i>Not at all</i>	7.3

n=55 (Skipped if answer to question 34 was “No” or “Don’t know”)

36. Would you say the news stories about the controversial emails made you:

<i>Much more certain that global warming IS happening</i>	0.0
<i>Somewhat more certain that global warming IS happening</i>	2.0
<i>Somewhat more certain that global warming IS NOT happening</i>	19.6
<i>Much more certain that global warming IS NOT happening</i>	19.6
<i>They had no influence on my level of certainty</i>	58.8

n=51 (Skipped if answer to question 35 was “Not at all”)

The final few questions are about you and your station.

37. I am:

<i>Male</i>	72.9
<i>Female</i>	27.1

n=70

38. I am (Age):

<29	6.9
30-39	25.0
40-49	43.1
50-59	22.2
>60	2.8

n=72

39. In general, do you think of yourself as:

<i>Very conservative</i>	7.2
<i>Somewhat conservative</i>	17.4
<i>Moderate</i>	56.5
<i>Somewhat liberal</i>	15.9
<i>Very liberal</i>	2.9

n=69