

Panel Title: 'Weather in Copenhagen...? Floods and flip-flops in an analysis of UK media coverage of climate change and its politics'

Paper: Preparations for a Post-Kyoto Media Coverage of UK Climate Policy

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In Bali December 2007, parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change settled on a 'road map' towards a new post-Kyoto climate treaty, to be finalised in Copenhagen at the end of 2009. While Copenhagen is expected to be successful in delivering an agreement, it will not come into force until 2013, leaving an interim period in which national initiatives will develop. On November 26th the UK Climate Change Bill gained Royal Assent; the Scottish Bill is expected to follow before Copenhagen, making greenhouse gas emissions reductions targets legally binding (Snell, 2008).

Recent media coverage of the policies would suggest a race between political parties to stake their claim for the domestic initiatives, both in Westminster and Holyrood. However, both bills come two decades after the establishment in 1988 of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and, despite their ambitious 80% emissions reductions targets, are already out of step with scientific reality. This is then a critical time for the interplay of dialogue on the policy texts of climate change; a time also which offers potential for transformations in the understanding and practice of media coverage of those texts (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005). Accordingly this paper looks at these climate policy processes and, specifically, how UK newspapers have constructed representations of the texts, to ask what consequences this has for public and political response to the crisis.

The paper begins with a brief overview of analysis into media coverage of climate policy, followed by an outline of the methodology employed in this study, and data collected. Analysis of two international processes, the Kyoto Protocol (since Russian ratification) and the IPCC 4th Assessment Report, provides context for an examination of the representation of UK and Scottish climate change bills.

Political aspects of climate change were addressed early in its media coverage. Studies have explored climate change policy as both politically defined and ideologically constructed within the media, to the benefit of status quo interests (Carvalho, 2005, 2007; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Specifically, Carvalho and Burgess addressed the 'critical discourse moments' of the first three IPCC reports (1990, 1995 and 2001) and the Kyoto Protocol, finding "politically motivated approaches" across the UK broadsheets in their criticisms of official positions and policies, as well as scorn for environmental concerns (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005). They also found little coverage of the 1994, 2000 and 2004 UK Climate Change Programmes; an absence which, they argue, contributed to the unchallenged acceptance of government decisions (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005:1464). That the UK press should avoid the intricacies of climate policy is unsurprising. However, the ways in which

these policy texts are represented is central to how institutions and publics respond to climate change.

Ideology has also been implicated in coverage of climate change: left- and right-of-centre journalists have been shown to make different news decisions around the subject (Dispensa & Brulle, 2003). This is an unsurprising account of mainstream media. Yet, as Carvalho has argued, ideological influences in the representation of climate change are blatantly under-researched (Carvalho, 2005:225). It is this gap in analysis of the ideological positions at work in representations of UK policy that is addressed by this research.

It might help to explain a little about the methodology. In total, 27 newspapers were analysed: 19 national UK daily and Sunday newspapers, with an additional six Scottish and two Welsh daily/Sunday titles. Newspaper articles were taken from the LexisNexis database using a range of enquiries relevant to each of the four policy texts: 1,637 articles were analysed for all mentions of the particular text, e.g. Kyoto Protocol, or UK Climate Change Bill. All mentions, not just headlines, were analysed. All articles were coded according to frame, as well as for prominence in the article, article genre, which sources were quoted, and what was the stimulus for the story, e.g. the issue of a report, severe weather event etc. Three overarching frames emerged from the pilot-coding:

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1. Accepted-positive: That the text or policy was a welcome political development and/or tool to help combat anthropogenic GHG emissions;
2. Rejected-negative: That the text or policy was a negative political development and/or unhelpful tool to help combat anthropogenic GHG emissions;
3. Ambiguous-Use: That the text or policy was of ambiguous and/or uncertain political/GHG emissions control benefit.

For the UK Climate Change Bill there were a number of derivative frames, discussed later.

To begin with, I looked at the Kyoto Protocol and the IPCC 4th Assessment Report. These are the key documents of international response to climate change of the past two decades. Representation of both is central to questions of support for action. However, these two aren't the focus—the analysis is here organised to provide context for the examination of domestic legislation.

Data for the Protocol is split into two periods. The first 2004-5 period is important for two key reasons. First, the treaty lost much of its saliency beyond this point. Of the 692 articles, 408 (59%) were published between 1st Sept 2004 and the end of 2005, with coverage intensity three times higher (avg. 27 mentions per month) than for 2006-08 (avg. nine per month). This first period also provides two 'critical discourse moments' pivotal to the treaty being of effective use for international action in combating GHG emissions: Russian ratification, bringing the treaty into legal effect, and the 2005 G8 Summit in Gleneagles.

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During the intense coverage of 2004-5, *critical-rejected* constructions of the Protocol as either harmful or unhelpful, and *ambiguous-use* frames presenting it as of uncertain benefit, accounted for the majority (62%) of articles. Taking only the 203 articles published in 2004-5 where the Protocol was the main story focus, this emphasis becomes more marked: there are three times as many articles representing a *critical-rejected* (38) or *ambiguous-use* (114) perception (152, 75%), than of articles using an *accepted-positive* frame (51, 25%). This pattern of coverage continues, although at a lesser intensity, for 2006-8.

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The Guardian/Observer and *Independent/Independent on Sunday* dominated coverage, with 58% (401) of all articles, and presented overall positive constructions of the Protocol—but only just: 53% of mentions in the *Guardian* and 56% in the *Independent* employed the *accepted-positive* frame, generally written by their environment correspondents. When the story moved from the environment pages to the politics section, ambiguous and critical representations were more prominently drawn.

A look at the different treatments of Russian Ratification may be useful. *The Guardian's* coverage employed a strong *accepted-positive* frame promoting Kyoto's benefit despite U.S. non-involvement, evident from its page 2 headline: "Putin joins fight against climate change, leaving Bush isolated and U.S. cut out of carbon trading market" (Brown, 2004). The article, by its environment correspondent, is overtly positive. Emphasis on the 'kick-starting' of the carbon market from which "U.S. business will be cut out" illustrates the editorial choice to rebut the notion that Kyoto could not work without the U.S.

Compare this to the more conservative papers. In *The Telegraph*: "The Kyoto accord looks like yesterday's approach to yesterday's conception of tomorrow's problem" (Collins, 2005); *The Sun*: "in China, 120 new airports are under construction today. Yet they're not expected to sign Kyoto. That helps explain why America is right not to" (Pascoe-Watson, 2005); *The Scotsman*: "The Kyoto Protocol? That was so last century" (Nelson, 2005).

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For Kyoto, political actors were the dominant claims-makers (49%) and political events the dominant cause for coverage (56%) across all papers. Party-political rhetoric dominated the climate policy debate, and the press organised their responses along politically motivated lines. Although providing less coverage, the two largest circulation quality papers—the more conservative *Times/Sunday Times* (64% of mentions *rejected* and/or *ambiguous*), *Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph* (72% *rejected* and/or *ambiguous*)—and individual commentators within the large-circulation tabloids, developed constructions of the treaty as being of ambiguous use or, at worse, to quote Jeremy Clarkson, a "completely useless" tax burden on developed nations. While *The Sun/NoTW* employed an overall *accepted-positive* frame, the level of coverage remained low: just 18 articles. However, this was wall-to-wall coverage compared with the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday*: just five mentions across the 43-month period, only one of which was positive.

In contrast, the unequivocal nature of the scientific *and* political consensus of the IPCC's 4th Assessment Report left little room for ambiguous or critical coverage. A total of 299 articles

referenced the 4th AR, with the majority (60%) constructed with the *accepted-positive* frame. For articles where the report was the main focus, this was 29%, two-and-a-half times more than for Kyoto, reversing—to some extent—patterns of de-legitimizing coverage found in response to previous IPCC reports (Carvalho, 2005:237).

The 4th AR was easier to report using the *accepted-positive* frame due its clear emphasis that action was needed *now*; this delivered certainty and drama. *The Guardian* (88 articles) and *The Independent* (54 articles) continued to dominate coverage, although the dramatic narrative also attracted the tabloids: 30% of coverage (89 of 299 articles). But the key factor in shaping frames was the difference in claims-makers. Reporting on the 4th AR was dominated by scientists (39%), with government/party political sources only 19%. Of course, the differing scientific and political purposes of the 4th AR and Protocol must be taken into account, but once the 4th AR reached the press, it avoided much of the party political jostling and ensuing ideological constructions that so complicated coverage of Kyoto.

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It was into this landscape of media coverage that the UK Climate Change Bill was launched in July 2006. Analysis of the UK Climate Change Bill runs from 1 January 2006 to 31 July 2008. On 15 November 2006 the bill was included in the Queen's Speech, while the peak in March 2007 (111 articles, 21%) covered the launch. The bill was introduced to the House of Lords on 14 November 2007. Analysis requires a wider set of frames to capture the representative strategies employed. The three key frames retain relevance, but a further three offer a fuller understanding of press coverage. They are:

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- *Accepted-if-strengthened*: a welcome political development and/or tool to help combat GHG emissions only if strengthened in its passage through parliament;
- *Rejected-Weakness*: Recognising the same weaknesses, but concluding the bill was fundamentally flawed with no constructive way to strengthen its function;
- *Rejected-Taxes*: That the bill brought in green or stealth taxes and should be rejected as either too costly or unnecessary.

Pressure for strengthened measures is in line with criticisms of the bill from the scientific community as insufficient to address climate change (Snell, 2008). For example, the bill's initial target for 60% GHG reductions by 2050 was criticised by campaign groups coalesced around the need for at least 80%, and has since been revised. These criticisms are not in question; rather, it is the discursive differences between frames that provide insight into ideological treatments of the bill, and its concatenated impact on public understanding.

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Of the 531 references to the bill, a third (180 articles) employed the *accepted-positive* frame. However, 102 of these were incidental mentions with a different main subject, skewing the impression of coverage. When the incidental mentions are removed, the *accepted-positive* frame is only the third most prevalent (15%) behind *accepted-if-strengthened* (19%) and *ambiguous-use* (18%). For the period 1 January 2006 to 31 July

2008, there were only 22 stories (4%) which fitted into the *'accepted-positive* frame AND main focus': less than one story a month for the 31-month period under analysis.

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Analysis of a sample of articles is useful to help illustrate the data. An article from Lewis Smith, environment correspondent at *The Times*, uses the *accepted-positive* frame, quoting Friends of the Earth's Tony Juniper as 'delighted' with the Bill, alongside a Defra Spokesman (Smith, 2006). In contrast, an article from *The Guardian's* political editor Patrick Wintour references the 60/80% target issue, with an unequivocal message: "The climate change bill must be strengthened" (Wintour, 2007). This example of the *accepted-if-strengthened* frame illustrates a focus on environmental aspects of the strengthening measures. Not all articles attempted this. In *The Telegraph*, political correspondent James Kirkup reports on the "significant backbench revolt" Gordon Brown faced over "his climate change policy" (Kirkup, 2008). The environmental causes of the revolt are removed, with emphasis given to the political conflict. But editorial lines do not hold across publications. While *The Telegraph* is often critical, its environment editor Charles Clover offers constructive arguments in seeking out measures to attend to climate change.

At the *Independent*, its deputy political editor, Colin Brown, ignores the strengthening measures altogether. His tone is highly critical, with headline focus on the Government's 'toothless approach' to legislation and efforts "dismissed by environmental groups" (Brown, 2006). This is illustrative of a *political* editorial line from *The Independent* that consistently employed *rejected* frames. However, this political rejection is in contrast with much (although not all) of *The Independent's* use of *accepted* frames by science editor Steve Connor and environment editor Michael McCarthy. These examples illuminate how each newspaper's political world-view is often folded into its climate change representations. While this is unsurprising for a UK parliamentary bill, it is significant for the discursive strategies employed in covering climate change, in particular who the claims-makers are. Fifty-seven percent of all quoted sources are government/party political, while 64% of articles are stimulated by political events. This representational landscape is complicated further by the proportion of non-news articles in the analysis. While news remained the dominant genre, with half of all mentions, a third (33%) came in opinion, comment or leader articles. Letters and other features accounted for 17%. This high proportion of opinionated treatments contributed to a politicized and rhetorical framing of the issue.

But perhaps most importantly for the bill, the UK tabloids took real notice. Now climate change was a threat to the purse. A powerful frame emerged in the black-top tabloids, the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday*, and the *Express/Sunday Express*, of the UK Climate Change Bill as cover for 'stealth' taxes rejected elsewhere. All but one of these articles addressed the bill as their primary or secondary focus and, critically, communicated explicit ideological positions *held* by the newspapers, rather than claims *reported* by them.

The Daily Mail spearheaded a 'Great Bin Revolt' campaign against the inclusion of a bin-tax in the Climate Change Bill, which rejected the bill outright with barely any reference to climate change itself. *Rejected* frames were most common within these papers, the high circulation *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* (and Sunday counterparts) as well as the largest circulation quality, *The Telegraph*.

Downing and Ballantyne track the decline in public support for the 'Polluter Pays Principle', quoting shadow environment secretary Peter Ainsworth that "a lot of the middle classes support the *Daily Mail* view that this is just another means of supporting stealth taxes" (Downing & Ballantyne, 2007:32). What we are left with is a picture of the UK press constrained by its political and ideological positions in its ability to report on policy developments on climate change, with significant impact on the representation of those policies. When located within an understanding that this is part of a larger construction of "fear, misery and doom" found particularly in black- and red-top coverage of climate change (Boykoff, 2008:561), it is reasonable to conclude that these *rejected* and *ambiguous-use* frames used by the tabloids, and at times in the qualities, contribute to a partial de-authorization of the bill and of future public support for its intended outcomes.

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In stark contrast to this was the reporting of the Scottish Climate Change Bill. All 115 mentions of the bill between 1 January 2007 and 31 July 2008 were analysed. Nearly half (55, 48%) came in the seven months of 2008. Evident is the overwhelmingly clear message constructed in the press. Of the 115 articles, 70% used an *accepted-positive* frame. Nearly every mention referred to institutional and public support for the bill; where criticisms were raised, fixative measures were included, constructing the need for a "strong" bill as urgent and necessary rather than flawed and throwaway.

While there were many positive elements to the bill—an 80% target and no 'bin-tax'—there were also contentious aspects, such as the lack of interim targets and no plans to include aviation, providing the press with plenty of opportunity for critical reportage. Some explanation for the positive framing comes from Rob Edwards, environment editor for the *Sunday Herald*. Edwards explained:

The Sunday Herald has an agreement with the Scotland Stop Climate Chaos coalition to develop a series of stories focused on the need for the Scottish Climate Change Bill to be as tough as possible. So the stories we've been running around the issue have been on the 'key asks' in the bill, such as aviation. Editorially the paper is very supportive of the agreement. It's a serious concern, so I get lots of space.

This position contrasts with that found among media decision-makers (BBC editors) only a few years earlier, who feared for their reputations if perceived as "buying-in" to climate change (Smith, 2005:1479). The key outcome here is to alter dramatically the composition of claims-makers quoted. Prior to 2008, 78% of all quoted sources were government/party-political. In 2008 once the "discourse coalition" (Hajer, 1995) with Stop Climate Chaos Scotland had formed, this fell to 29%. Previously, campaigning groups had made up only 13% of the claims-makers: this more than tripled, to 48%.

There were no *critical-rejected* articles. Although 30% (35) fitted the *ambiguous-use* frame, these were in general of a milder tenor, e.g. 'Fears of climate change "fudge"' (Howarth, 2008). This illustrates that editorial strategies and the world-views of publications, and the journalists that write for them, can combine to take a stance on the representation of political processes for social benefit, rather than one steeped in political contradiction. Such

decisions contribute to a responsible media practice in helping the public understand the policy tools of climate change.

So, in conclusion, what has emerged is a picture of a politicized treatment of those texts most identified with Westminster political agendas; the distortion of the text's value from an over-reliance on party political sources as frame-setters; and widespread media representation of the texts as accepted, rejected or of ambiguous use, in line *not* with the text's legitimacy or potential efficacy in combating climate change, but with a newspaper's established ideological position. This contributed to so many competing and contradictory constructions that, as for Weingart and colleagues in their 2000 analysis of German media coverage, these "disturbances in discourse and doubts on credibility and certainty" are the rule rather than the exception, and can only put the scientific consensus position at risk (Weingart et al., 2000:281).

This has important implications for climate policy. The media's contribution to constructive criticism at both national and international level will be important in ensuring legislation is strong enough to alter current emissions patterns, and to aid the public in their democratic role. The public continues to gather most of its knowledge of climate change from the media, yet the representation of key climate policy has often been one of criticism, contradiction and rejection. The public does not need to know complex policy issues inside out, but it does need to be able to understand the consequences of both acting and inaction. With solutions to what should replace Kyoto emerging, the ambition is, perhaps, to find a way to extract discourses of climate policy from the structural ideological practices of the UK press in their coverage of government and party politics.