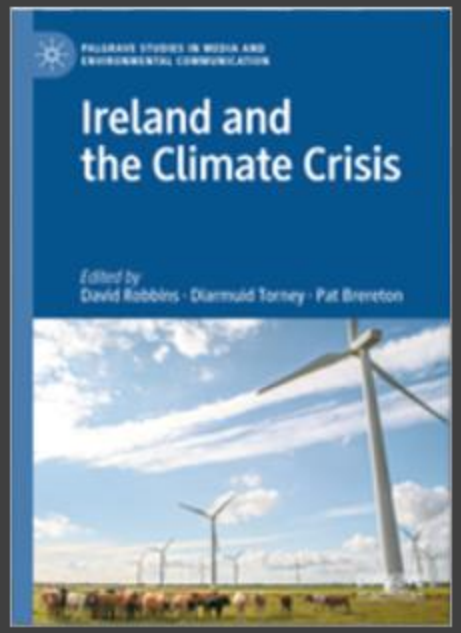
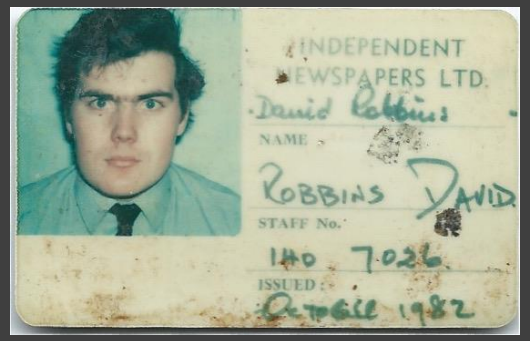
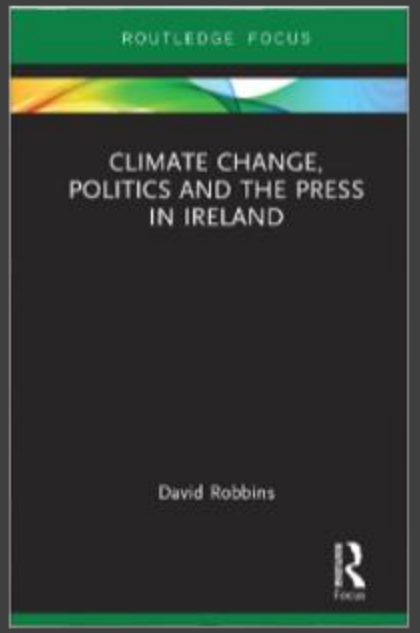
The role of the news media in the climate crisis

DCU Institute for Climate and Society and Comisiún na Meán / Dr David Robbins







- **Why listen to me?**

  - Former journalist – 25 years experience in newsrooms
  - Studied media coverage of climate change for over 10 years
  - Lecture in journalism
  - Founder DCU MSc in Climate Change: Policy, Media & Society
  - Co-Director, DCU Centre for Climate & Society

Why media's role is important

- TV and the websites of major news organisations (NOT specialized outlets) are the most-used sources for climate news (Reuters DNR 2022)
- "Whether the news media want this or not, they tend to be their country's primary destination for people who would like to learn more about the climate crisis." (Wolfgang Blau, 2022)

Media salience = public salience

- Levels of coverage give audiences cue to how important climate change is
- Ways coverage is presented influences audiences as to how they should think about it (e.g. framing)
- Media are part of complex 'agenda systems' – mechanisms by which issues rise to the top of the policy agenda

Norms and roles

Media norms

- To inform
- To warn (watchdog. E.g. financial crash)
- To investigate
- To hold power to account
- To promote democracy?
- To act in a socially responsible manner?

Reporter norms

- Immediacy
- Autonomy
- Objectivity
- Fairness
- Balance
- Ethics

Climate journalism is changing

- Objectivity becomes “moral clarity”
- Reporting becomes interpretation
- “Stenography” becomes knowledge-based/evidence-based journalism
- Critical advocacy stance

RTE survey research 2019

- Concern and interest is high among all key audiences
- Ranks as “average” for viewing potential – need to sell and be creative around climate programming
- 4 in 10 say they know “little or nothing” about climate – role for public service news organisation

FIG 68: SOURCES OF MOST ATTENTION PAID TO CLIMATE CHANGE NEWS

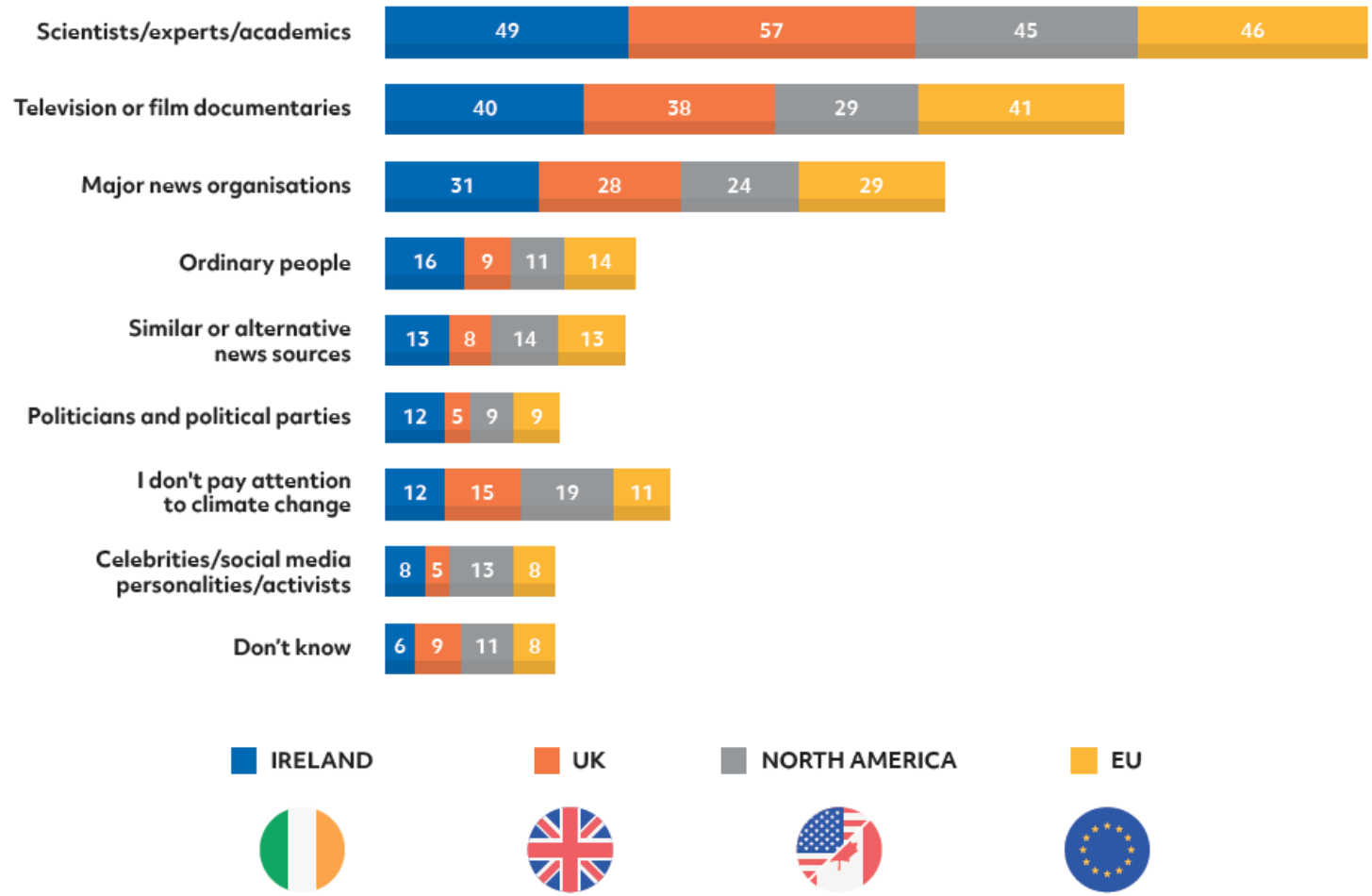


FIG 71: ATTITUDES TO NEWS COVERAGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

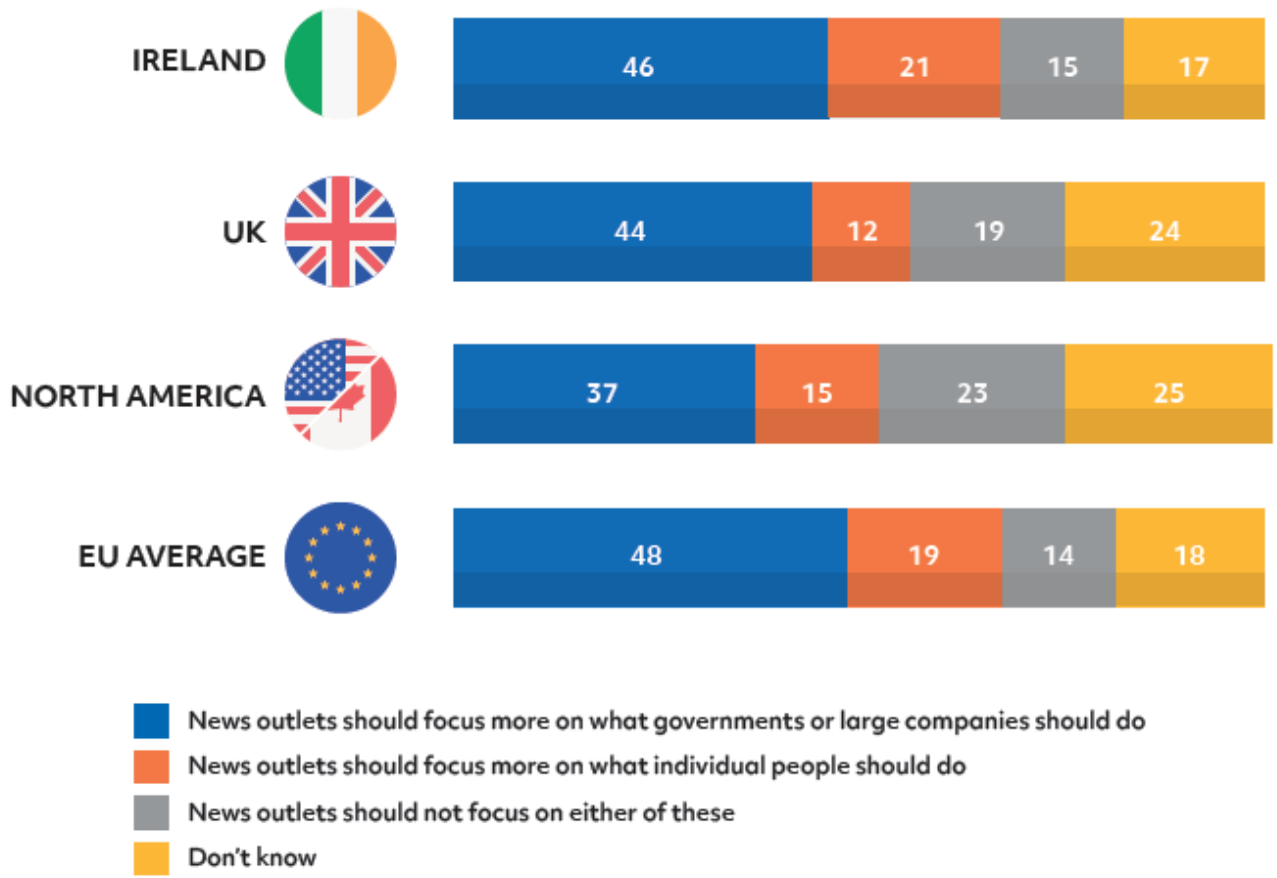


FIG 72: ATTITUDES TO NEWS OUTLET VIEWS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

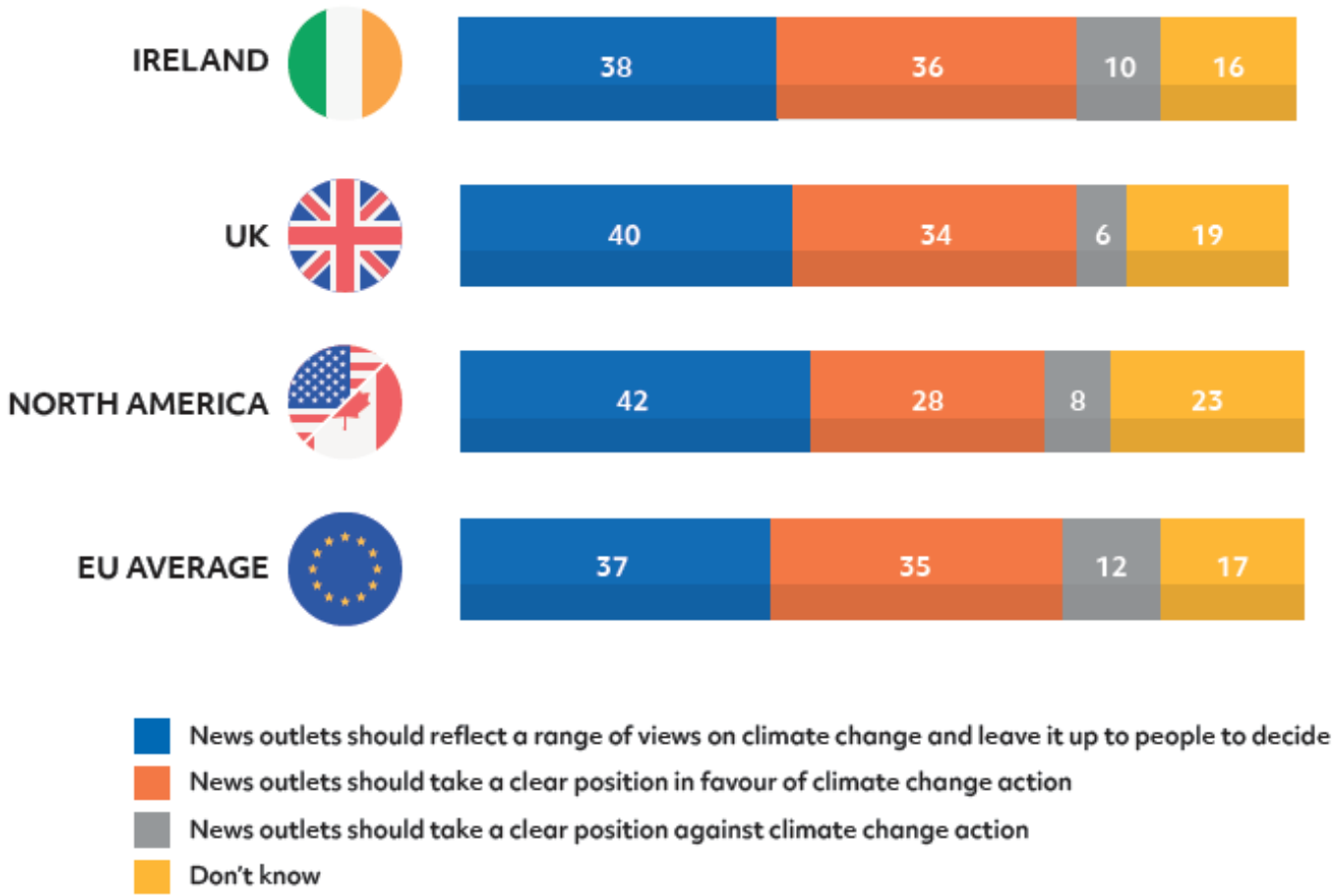
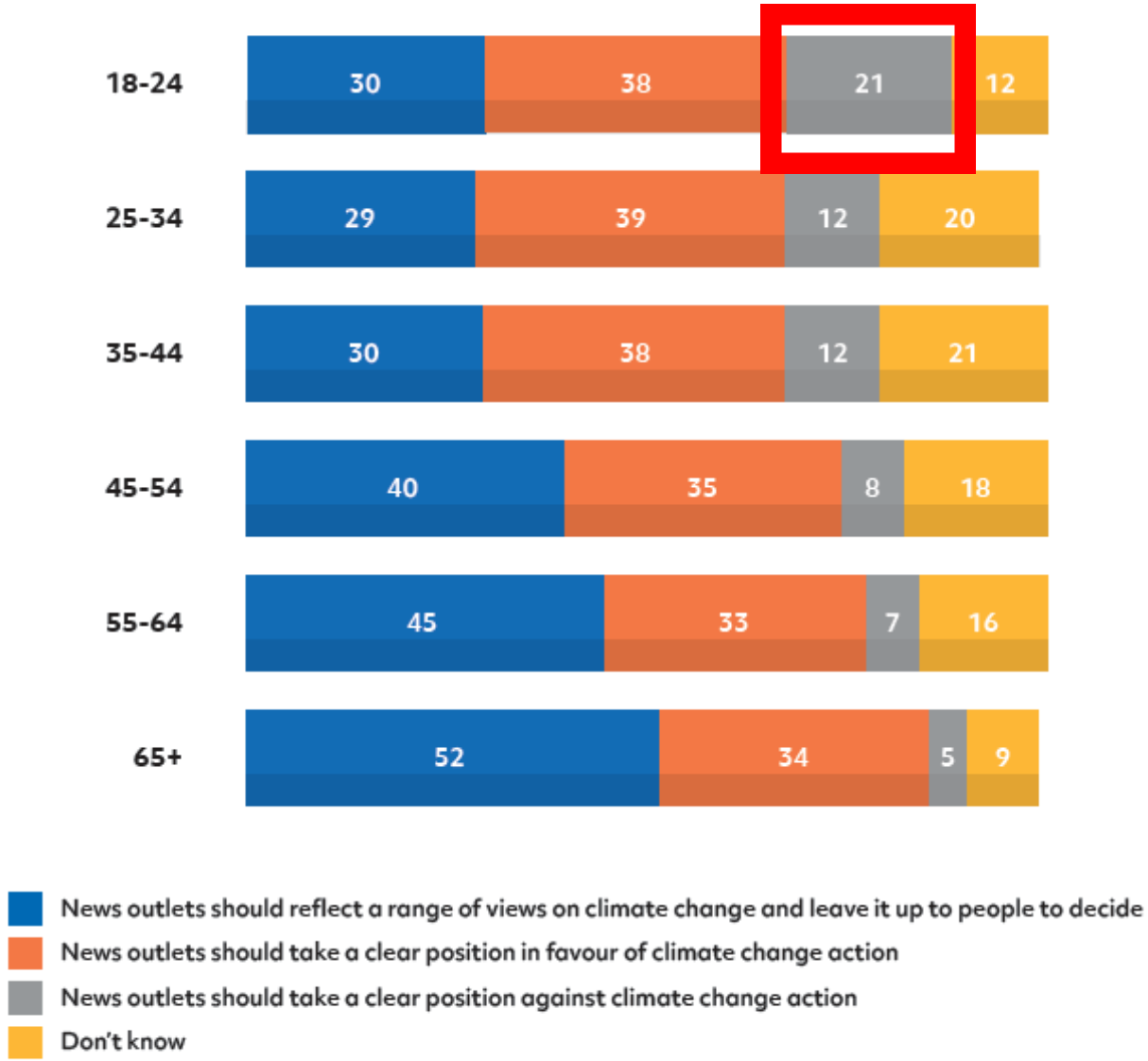
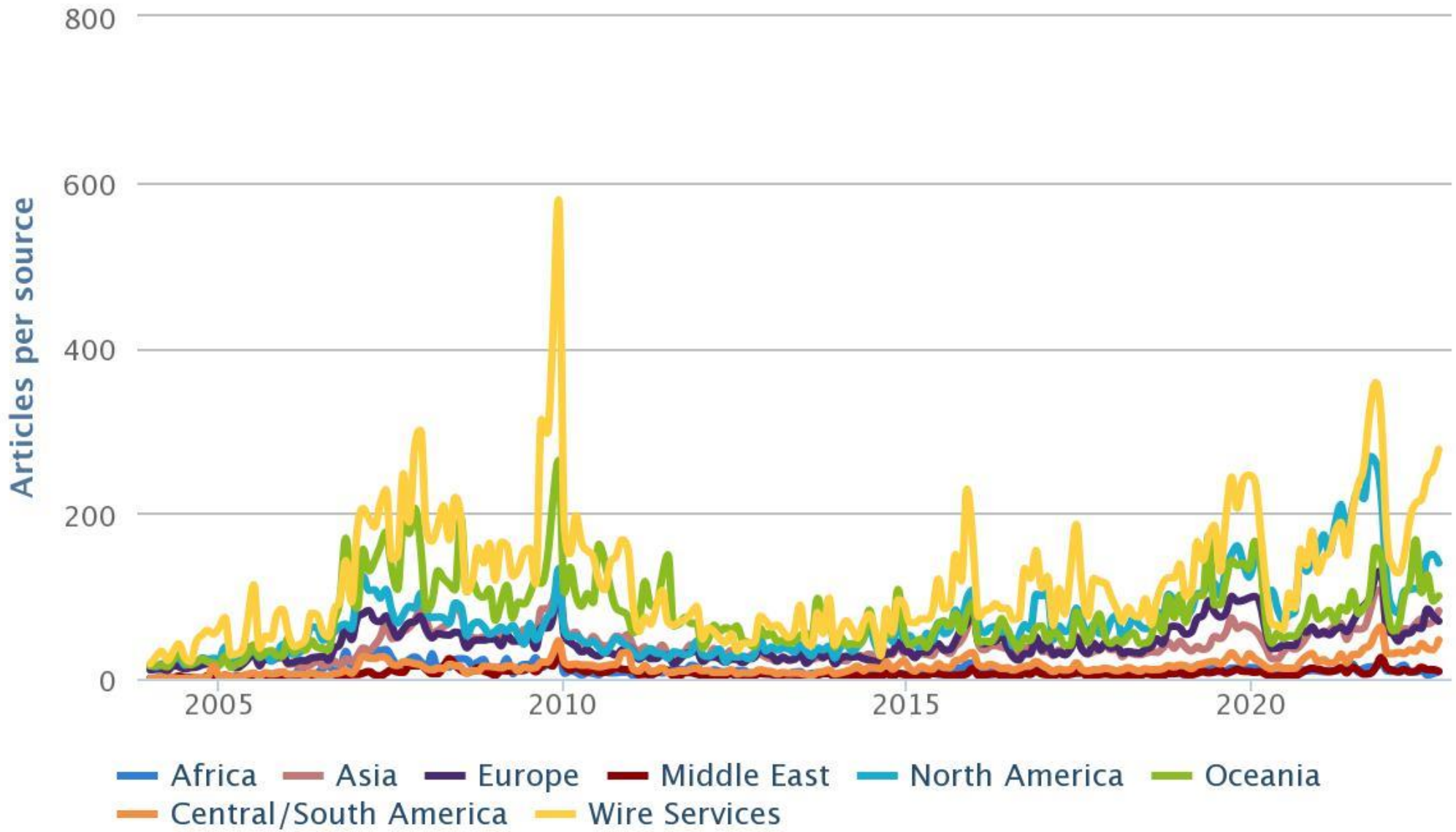


FIG74: ATTITUDES TO CLIMATE CHANGE COVERAGE BY AGE

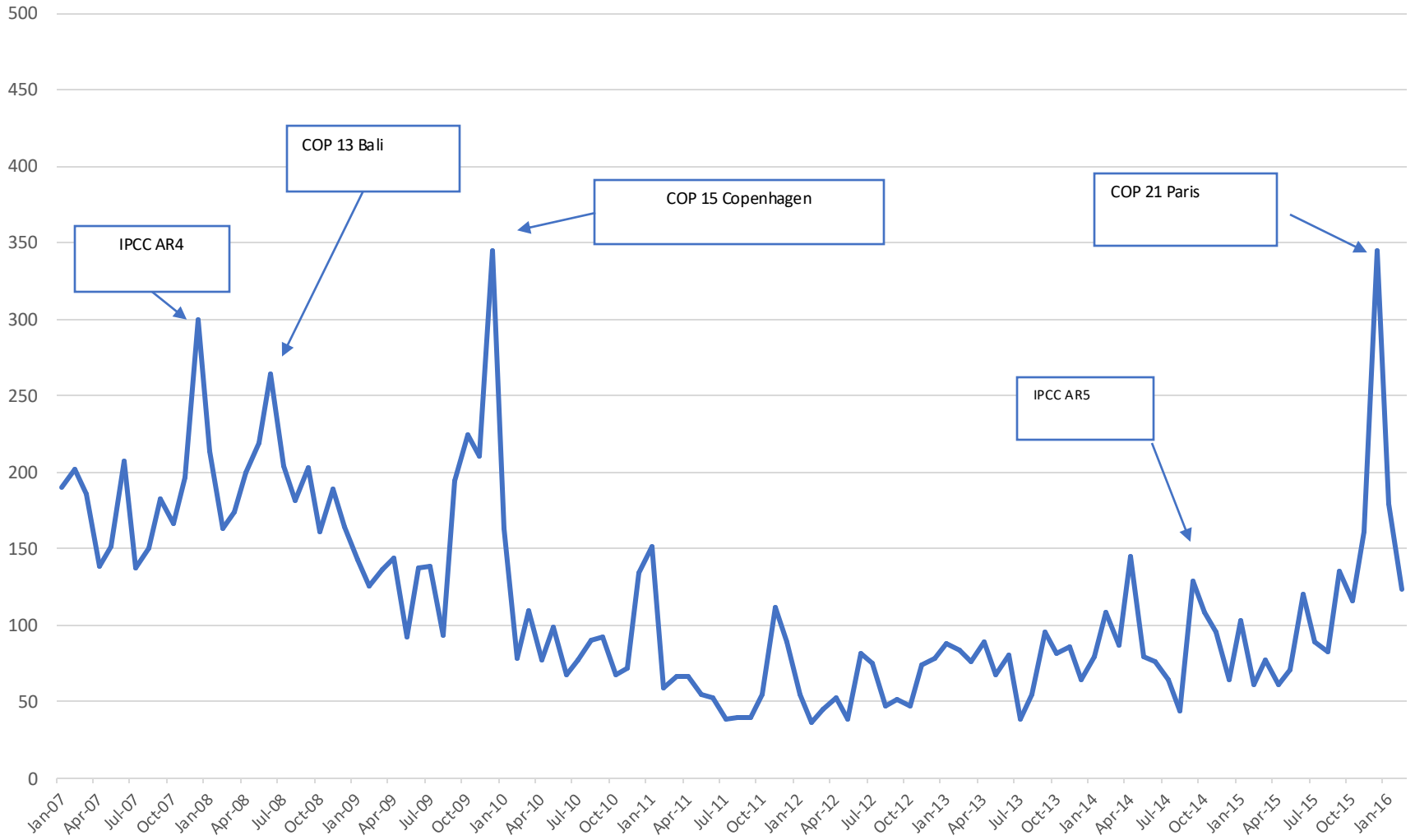


2004–2022 World Newspaper Coverage of Climate Change or Global Warming



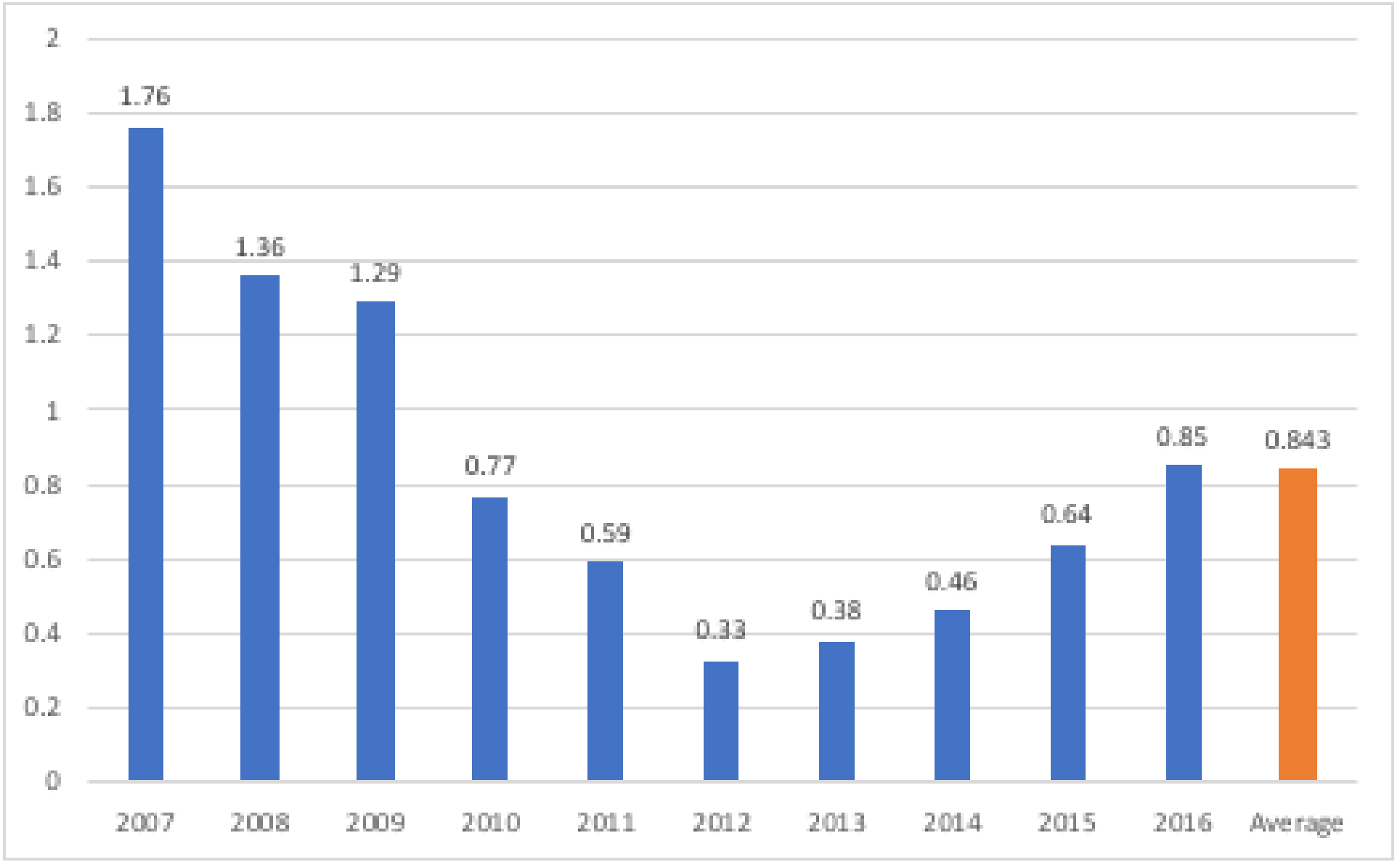
Media and Climate Change Observatory, University of Colorado Boulder, http://mecco.colorado.edu

Coverage of climate change in Ireland



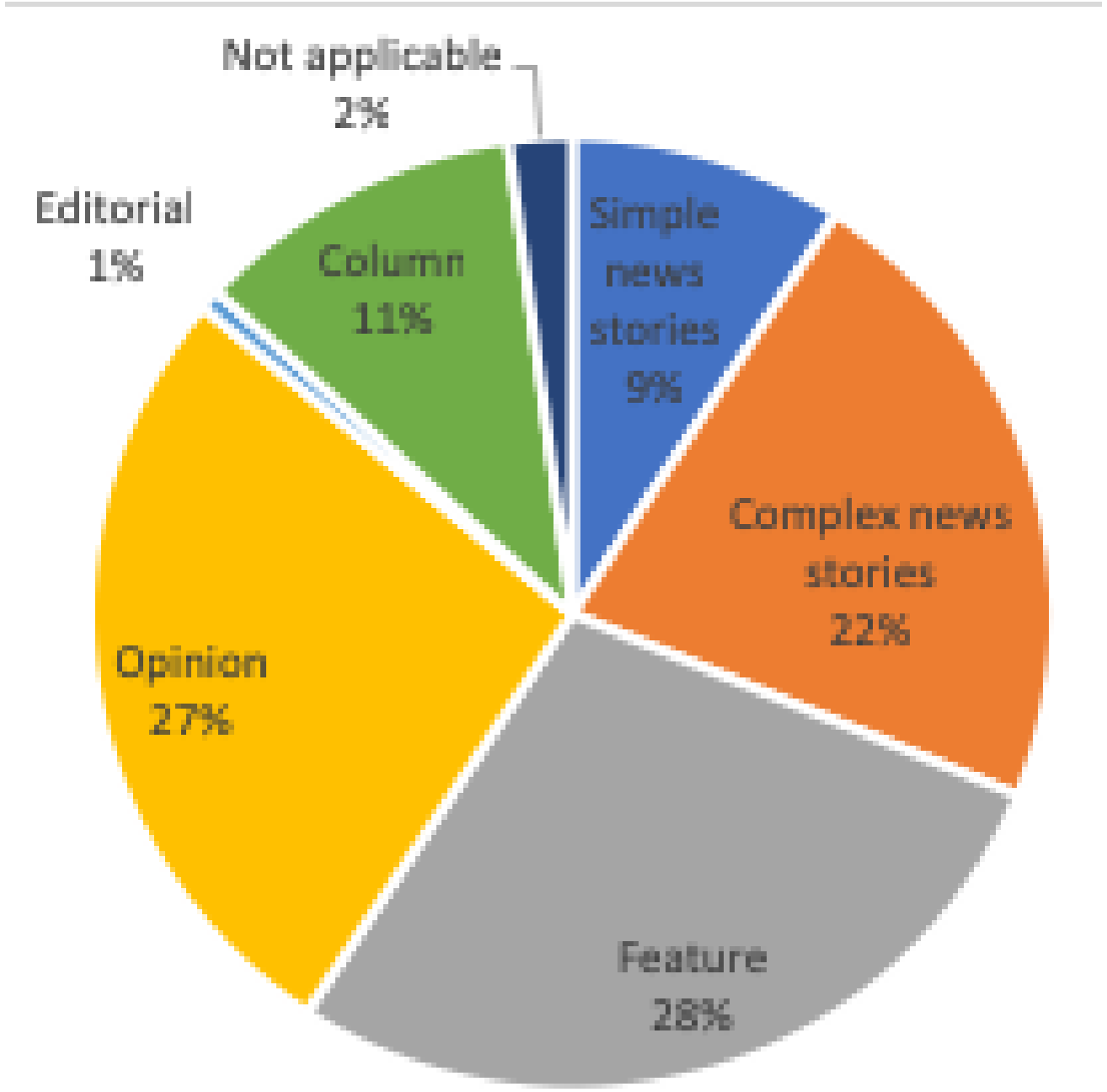
Robbins 2019

Fig 5.2: Climate change stories as a percentage of total news coverage by year

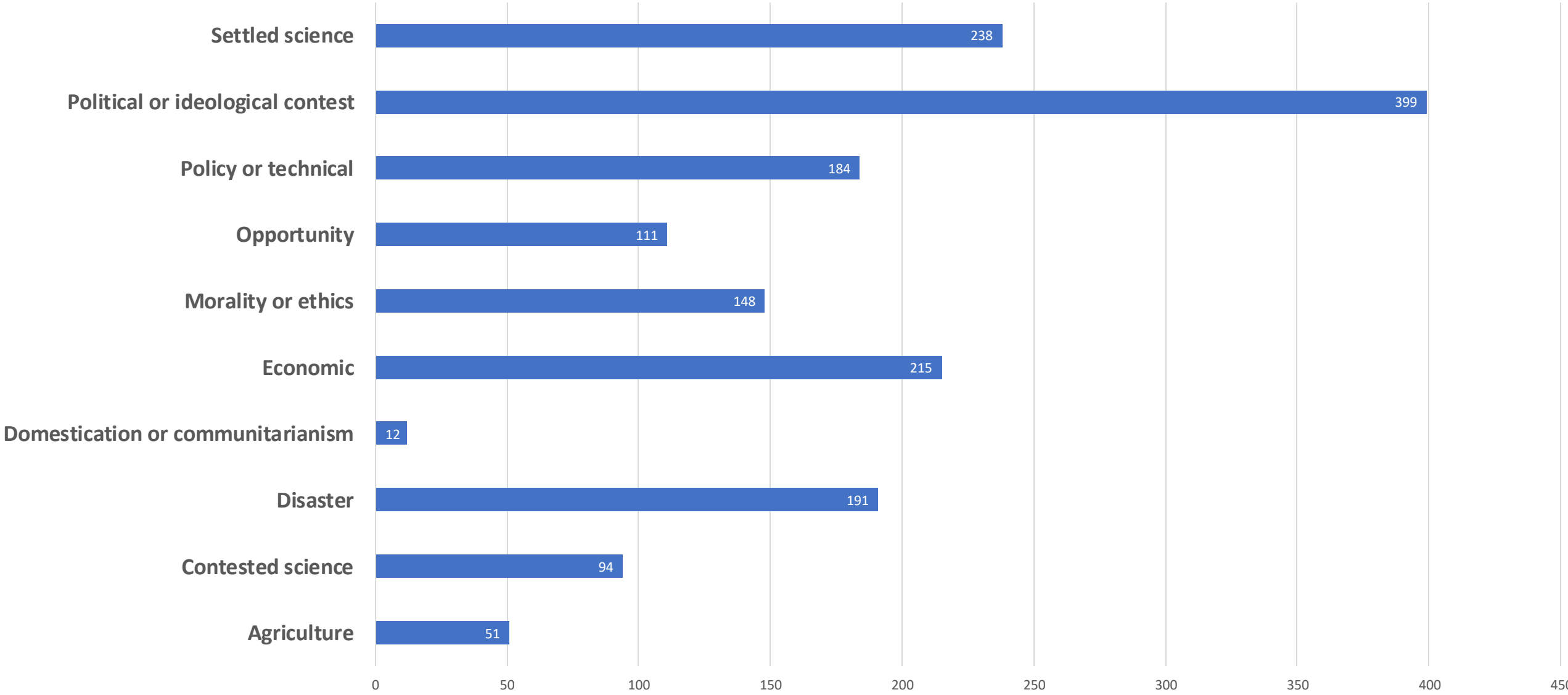


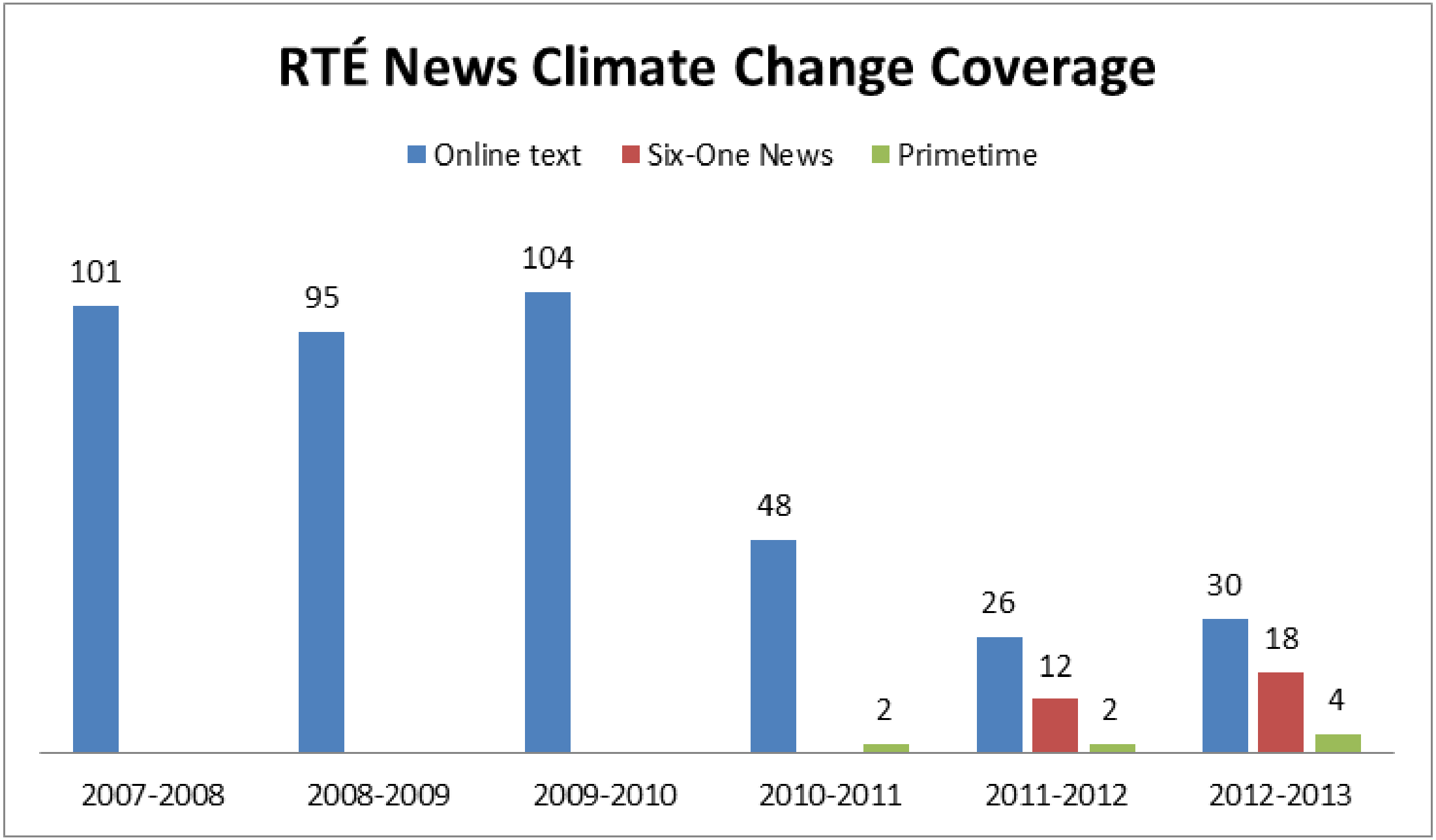
Robbins 2019

Print coverage - article type



How the Irish media frames climate change





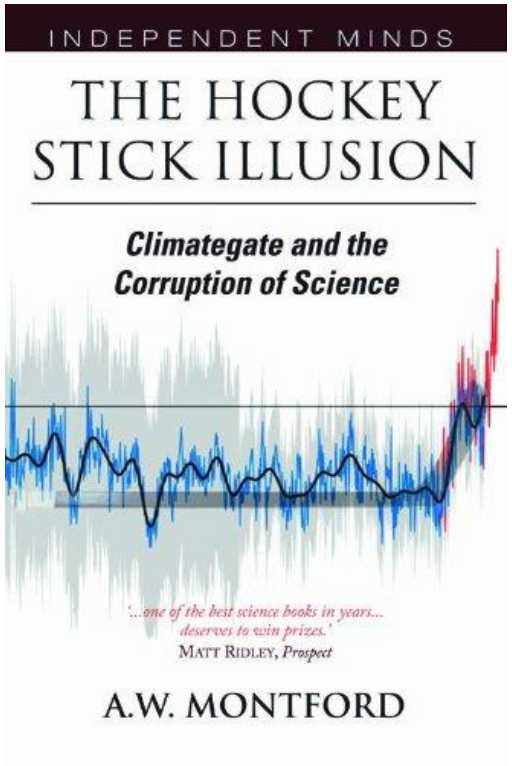
Cullinane & Watson 2014

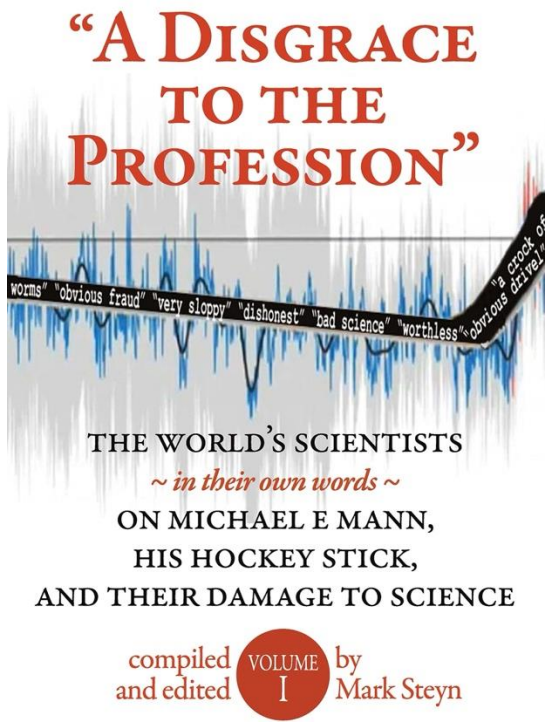
Climate change – the story from hell

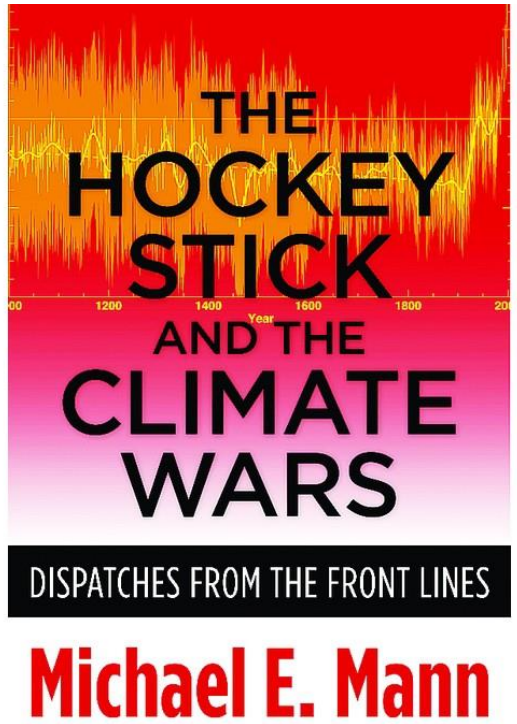
- Complex
  - Atmospheric, soil, ocean, ice sciences
  - Carbon trading, energy systems
  - National, EU, and UN levels
  - Full of acronyms: UNFCCC, IPCC, COP, CCS, LULUCF
  - What am I a world expert on today?

Drowning in data

- Climate data presents challenges for journalists
  - Reporters generally not numerate or climate literate
  - Not trained to evaluate scientific studies
  - Difference in ways scientists and journalists communicate
  - Huge amount of data being produced by researchers







The same story, over and over again

- Climate change does not align with news values
- Not a murder
- Slow-moving, long-term (until now)
- Unobtrusive (mostly)
- Repetitive
- Feeling that “we covered this already” and ”we spent the money”
- Can lead to negative reaction online
- Time and resource constraints, reliance on PR
- Sense that environment is “just another lobby group”

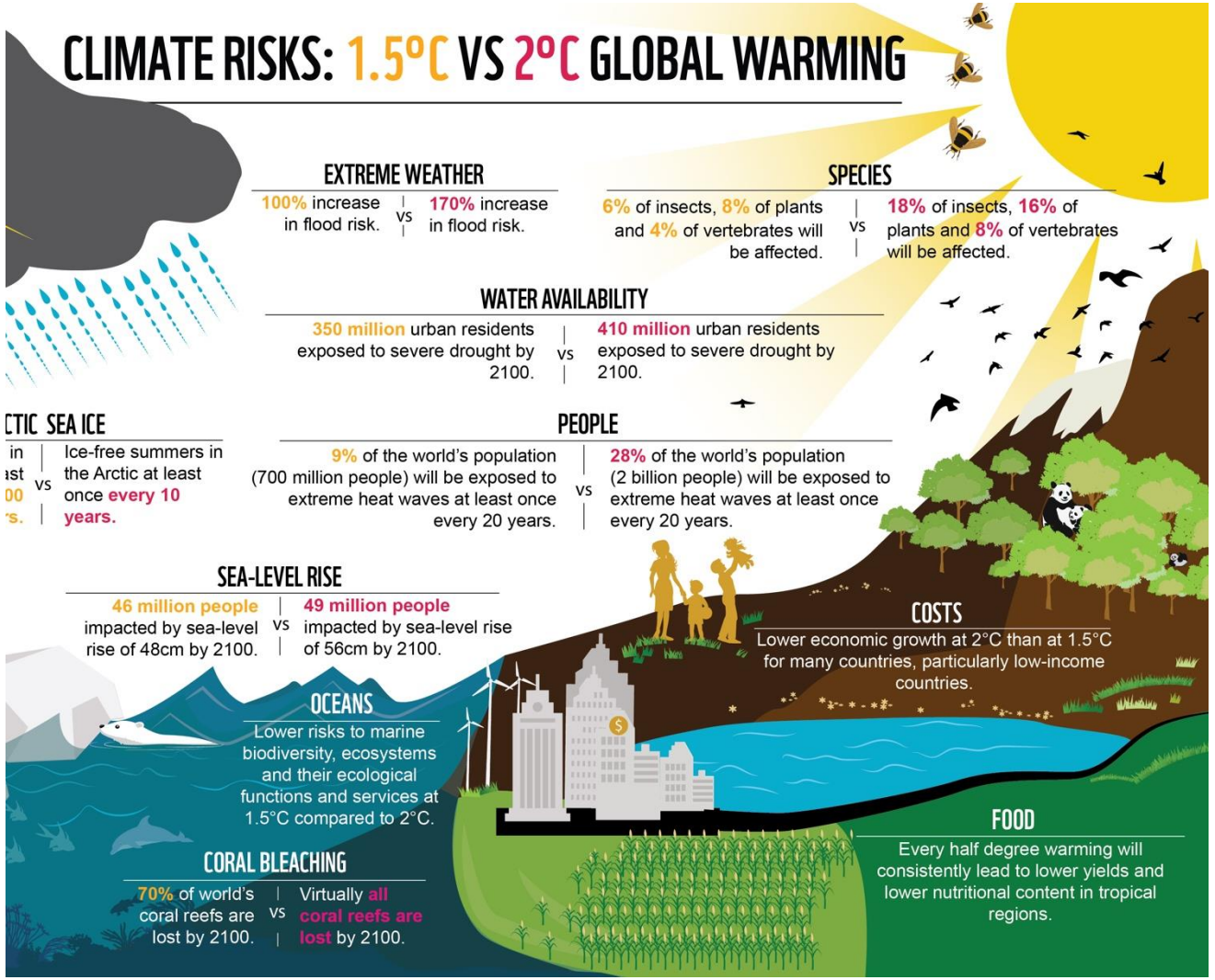
So how can the media rise to this challenge?

Drawn from Wolfgang Blau's 2022 lecture at Oxford, and the European Broadcasting Union's 2023 report

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/apply-oxford-climate-journalism-network

The basics for general reporters

- Know what the Greenhouse Effect is and how it works
- Know the difference between 1.5C and 2.0C of warming
- Know about carbon budgets and sectoral targets
- Know about lifestyle emissions



Using the right words

Upping the ante? The effects of "emergency" and "crisis" framing in climate change news

Lauren Feldman[1] · P. Sol Hart[2]

Received: 26 May 2021 / Accepted: 6 September 2021 /Published online: 16 November 2021

Abstract
News organizations increasingly use the terms "climate emergency" and "climate crisis" to convey the urgency of climate change; yet, little is known about how this terminology affects news audiences. This study experimentally examined how using "climate emergency," "climate crisis," or "climate change" in Twitter-based news stories influences public engagement with climate change and news perceptions, as well as whether the effects depend on the focus of the news (i.e., on climate impacts, actions, or both impacts and actions) and on participants' political ideology. Results showed no effect of terminology on climate change engagement; however, "climate emergency" reduced perceived news credibility and newsworthiness compared to "climate change." Both climate engagement and news perceptions were more consistently affected by the focus of the stories: news about climate impacts increased fear, decreased efficacy beliefs and hope, and reduced news credibility compared to news about climate actions. No interactions with political ideology were found.

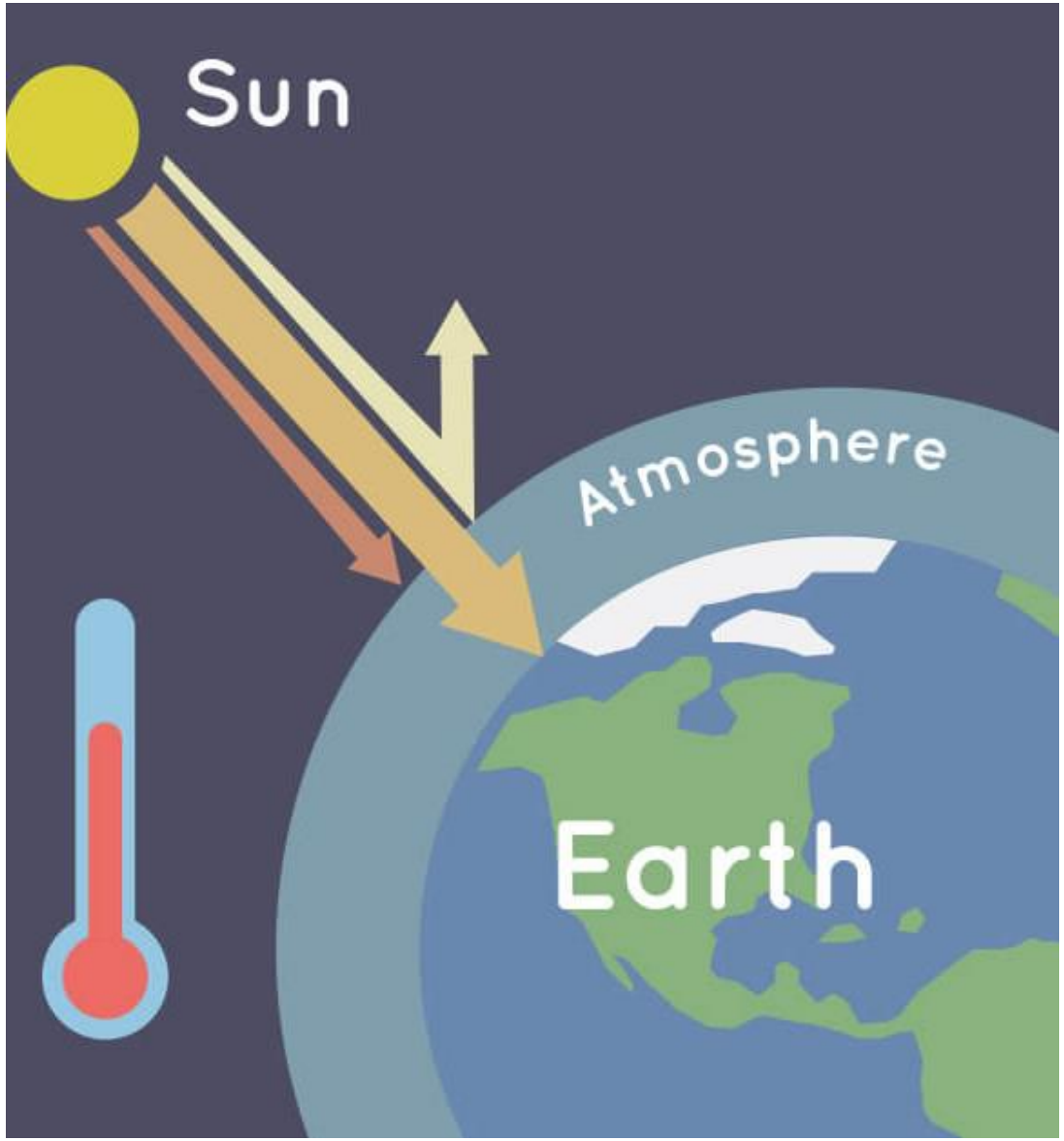
Why the Guardian is changing the language it uses about the environment

From now, house style guide recommends terms such as 'climate crisis' and 'global heating'

The destruction of Arctic ecosystems forces animals to search for food on land, such as these polar bears in northern Russia. Photograph: Alexander Grir/AFP/Getty Images

Increase climate literacy in your organisation

- Basic knowledge of the greenhouse effect
- Know where to find reliable, peer-reviewed information
- Know the difference between a 1.5C and a 2C world (we're currently heading for 2.4C)
- Understand carbon budgets, sectoral emissions inventories, and trends
- Know what carbon budget is left, and how we're 'spending it'



Increase climate literacy in your audiences

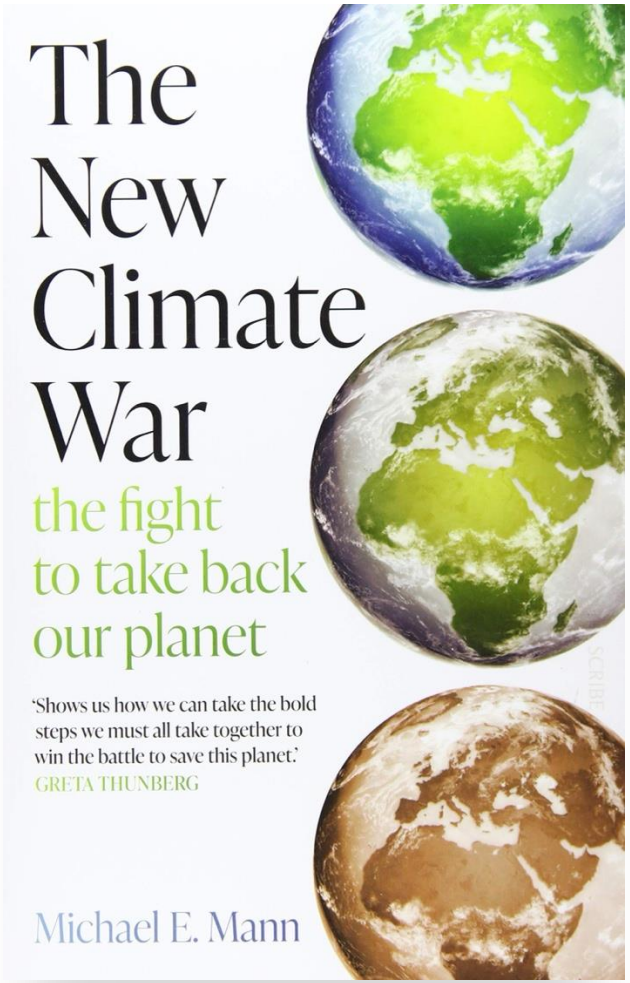
- Survey your audiences re basic understanding of climate change
- Can do this informally by setting interactive quizzes and noting data
- Think about ‘climate dashboards’
- Consider fact boxes, sidebars and explainers (e.g. *Irish Examiner*)

Think about newsroom organisation

- Increase resources to existing science desk
- Create new, separate climate desk
- Create virtual climate desk (co-ordinate coverage via existing ‘verticals’)

Coverage-specific concerns

- Watch out for false balance (journalists underestimate the size of the scientific consensus on climate)
- Institutional suspicion of activism
  - Advocacy or activist journalism
  - Seeing climate as just another lobby group
- Importance of climate visuals (use www.ClimateVisuals.org)



Climate Change, Disinformation, and How to Combat It

Annual Review of Public Health, Forthcoming

23 Pages • Posted: 13 Nov 2020

Stephan Lewandowsky
University of Bristol; The University of Western Australia

There are 2 versions of this paper

Date Written: September 16, 2020

Abstract

Climate change presents a challenge at multiple levels: It challenges our cognitive abilities because the effect of the accumulation of emissions is difficult to understand. Climate change also challenges many people's worldview because any climate mitigation regime will have economic and political implications that are incompatible with libertarian ideals of unregulated free markets. Those political implications have created an environment of rhetorical adversity in which disinformation abounds, thus compounding the challenges for climate communicators. The existing literature on how to communicate climate change and dispel misinformation converges on several conclusions: First, providing information about climate change, in particular explanations of why it occurs, can enhance people's acceptance of science. Second, highlighting the scientific consensus can be an effective means to counter misinformation and raise public acceptance. Third, culturally aligned messages and messengers are more likely to be successful. Finally, climate misinformation is best defanged before it is encountered through a process known as inoculation, although debunking techniques can also be successful.

Keywords: climate change, science denial, disinformation, communicating science

Computer-assisted classification of contrarian claims about climate change

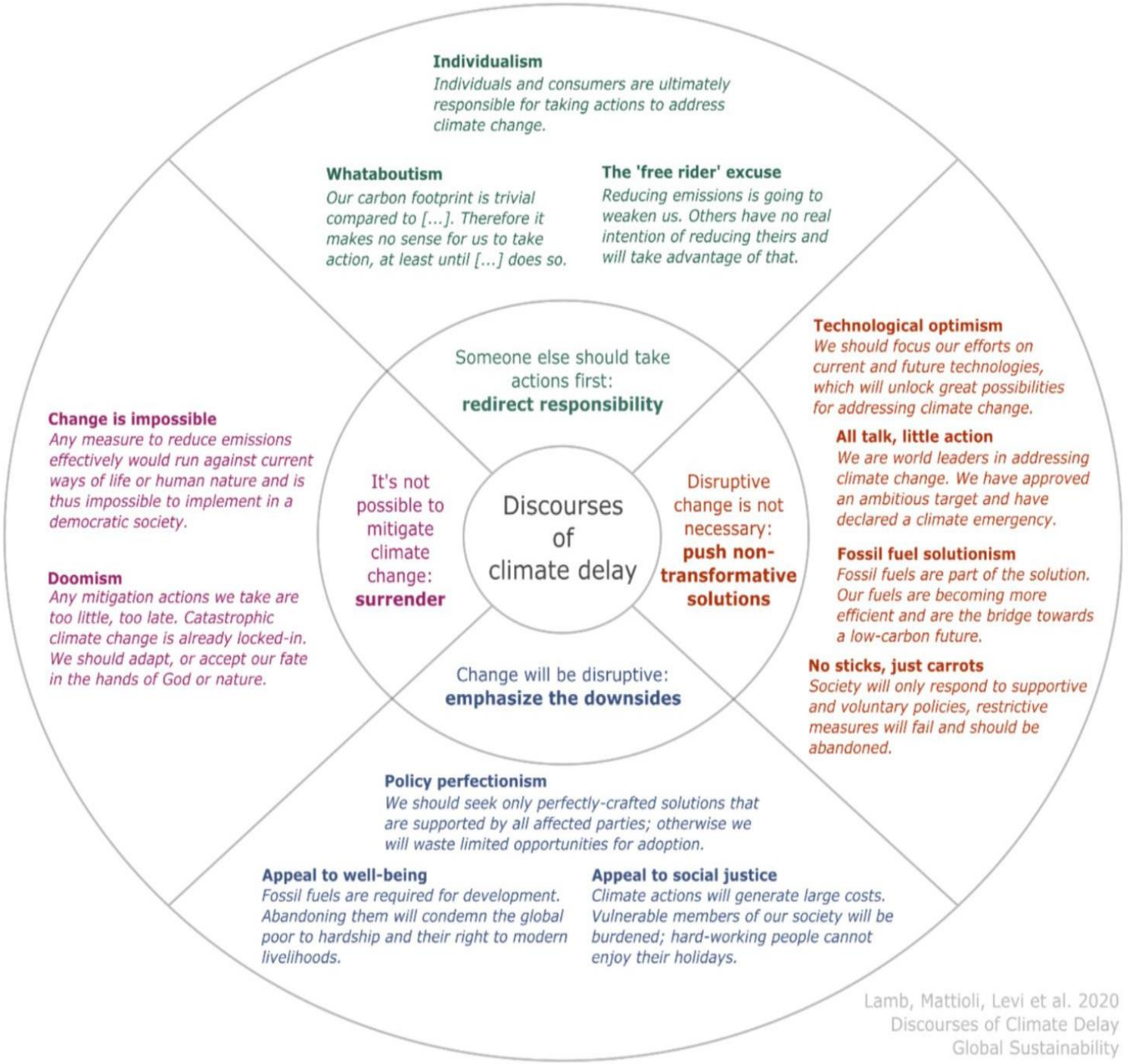
Travis G. Coan[1], Constantine Boussalis[2], John Cook[3,4]✉ & Mirjam O. Nanko[1]

A growing body of scholarship investigates the role of misinformation in shaping the debate on climate change. Our research builds on and extends this literature by (1) developing and validating a comprehensive taxonomy of climate contrarianism, (2) conducting the largest content analysis to dat on contrarian claims, (3) developing a computational model to accurately classify specific claims, and (4) drawing on an extensive corpus from conservative think-tank (CTTs) websites and contrarian blogs to construct a detailed history of claims over the past 20 years. Our study finds that the claims utilized by CTTs and contrarian blogs have focused on attacking the integrity of climate science and scientists and, increasingly, has challenged climate policy and renewable energy. We further demonstrate the utility of our approach by exploring the influence of corporate and foundation funding on the production and dissemination of specific contrarian claims.

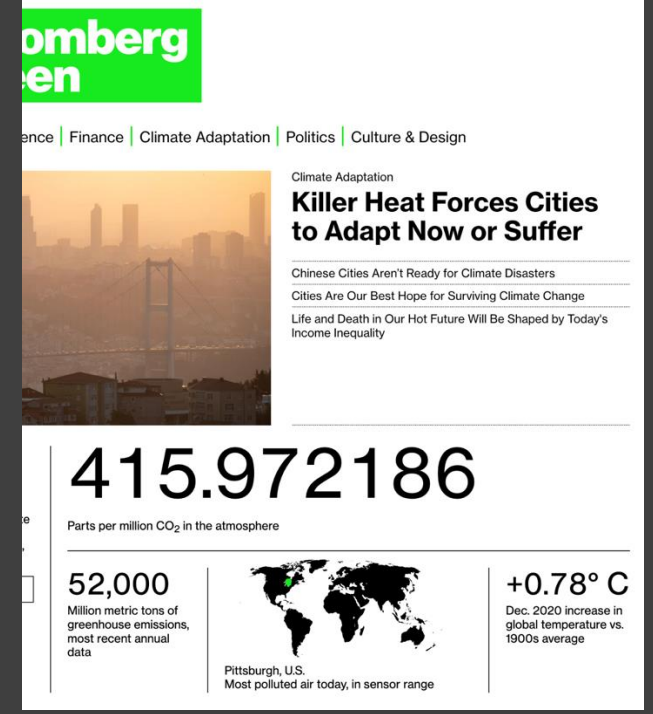
Prepare your staff for trolling

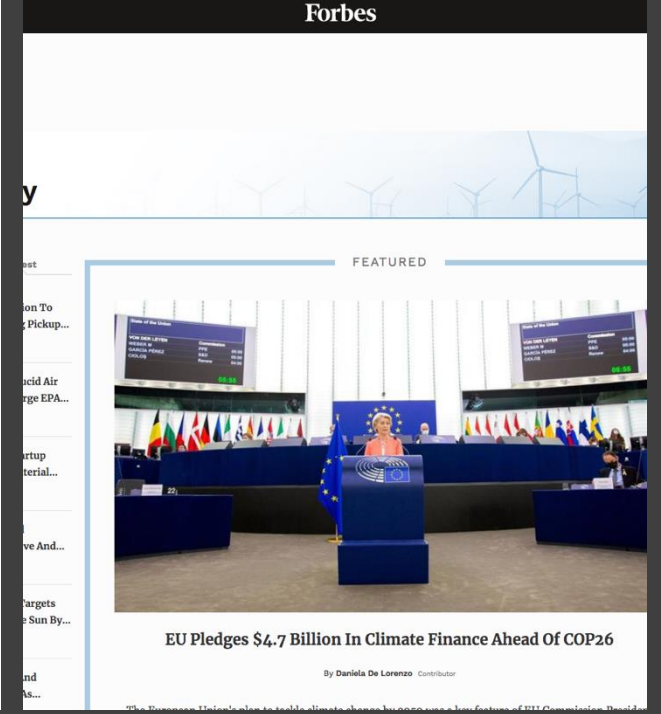
- Encourage staff to become familiar with the most common forms of climate trolling
- Recommend they read 'The New Climate Wars' by Michael Mann
- Make research resources available:
  - Classification of contrarian claims
  - Climate Change Disinformation and How to Combat it

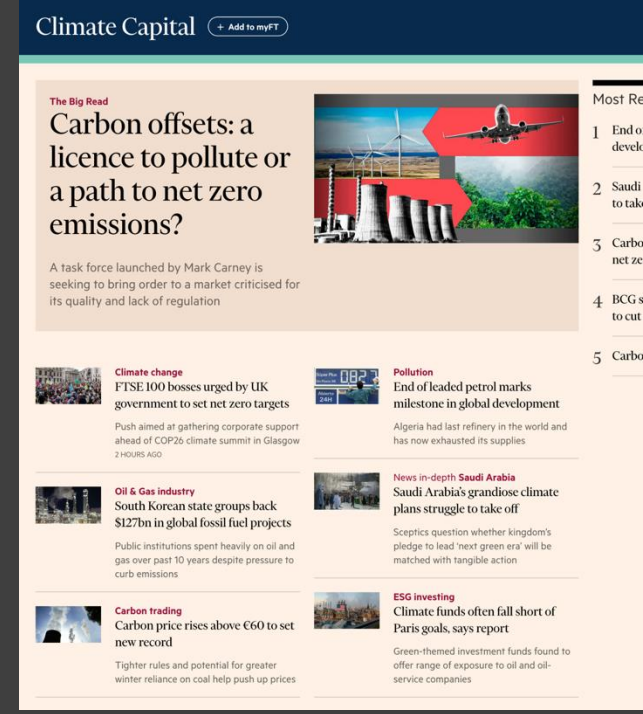
Interrogate discourses of delay

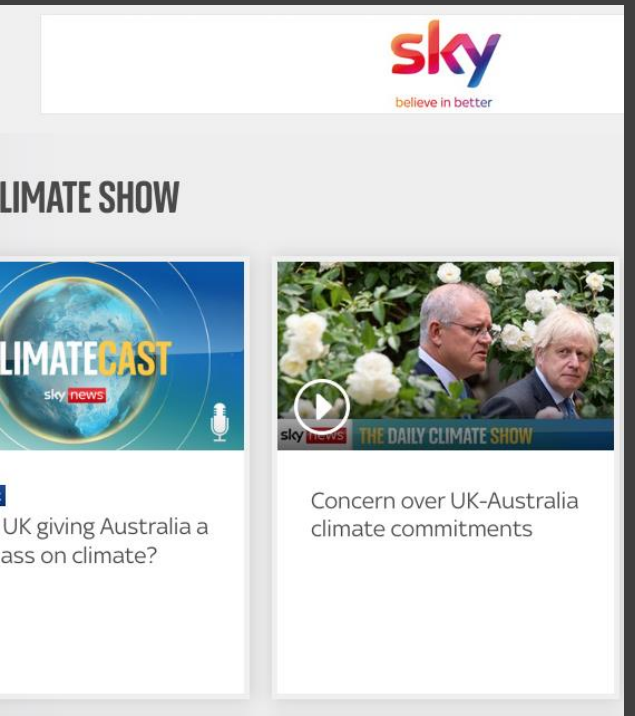


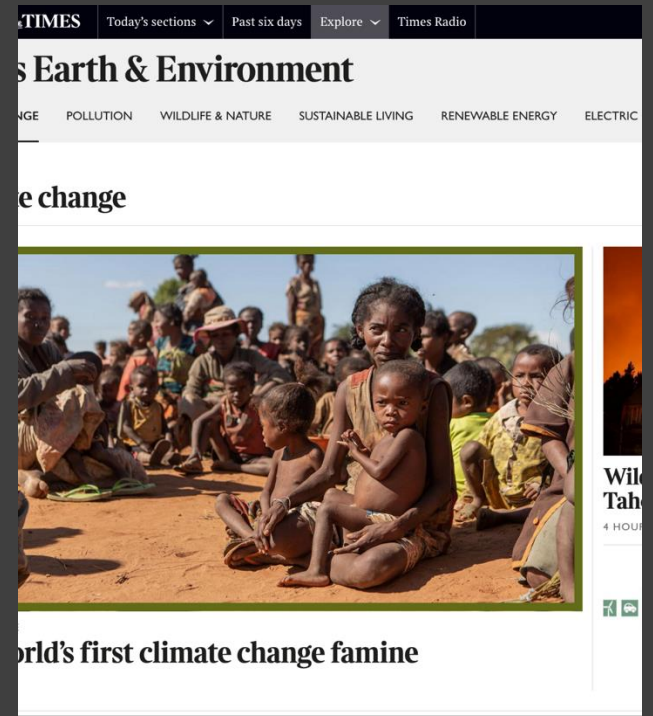
Lamb, Mattioli, Levi et al. 2020
Discourses of Climate Delay
Global Sustainability









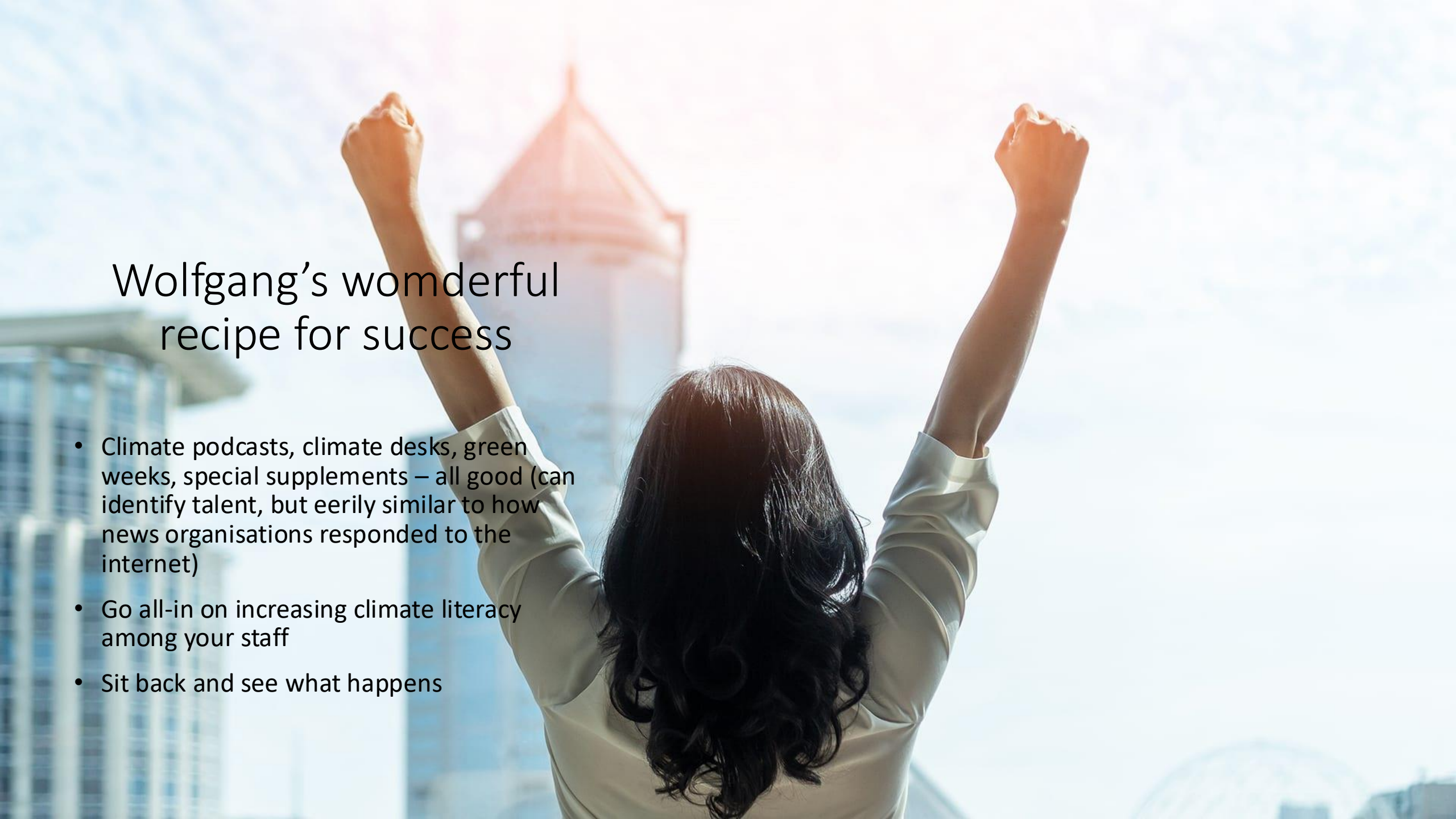


Be careful about audience metrics

"News organisations need to ask themselves whether this doesn't amount to a form of editorial greenwashing itself: To produce climate journalism so you can say you are doing it and so you can point to the URL's of each published story while never really throwing the full authority and distribution power of your news organisation's brand behind it"

Be careful about attribution

- Most news organisations
  - Give climate change too much credit for ‘causing’ extreme weather OR
  - Don’t mention it at all
- In the immediate aftermath, you can say that climate change made an event more likely and more extreme
- Attribution studies take about two weeks to complete
- Great resource for journalists: https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/



Wolfgang's womderful recipe for success

- Climate podcasts, climate desks, green weeks, special supplements – all good (can identify talent, but eerily similar to how news organisations responded to the internet)
- Go all-in on increasing climate literacy among your staff
- Sit back and see what happens

French journalists' charter Sept 2022

- Signed by 500 journalists
- Include biodiversity in climate coverage
- Be educational
- Think about words and images
- Widen coverage to systems
- Investigate causes (e.g. growth)
- Be transparent
- Expose denial and delay
- Oppose advertising from polluters
- Be independent from proprietors
- Lower your own carbon footprint
- Be collaborative

Upgrading
journalistic practices
to tackle **the ecological emergency:**
a charter

The scientific consensus is clear: both the climate crisis and the rapid decline of biodiversity are underway, and human activity is to blame. The impacts on ecosystems and human societies are global and, in some cases, irreversible. Planetary boundaries are being reached and exceeded one after the other, and half of the world's population is already highly vulnerable to climate change.

In its sixth report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) emphasizes the crucial role the media must play in informing people about climate change. It is up to journalists to rise to the challenge that these upheavals represent for current and future generations. As we are faced with the critical emergency of the climate crises, we journalists must step up our practices in order to fully address these issues – and what's at stake – in our coverage.

That is the purpose of this charter. We therefore encourage all journalists and media to:

1 **Cover all stories related to climate, biodiversity and social justice in an interdisciplinary manner**
They are intricately intertwined. Ecology can no longer be limited to a separate column; it must become a prism through which stories are approached.

2 **Take an educational approach**
Scientific data relating to ecological issues are often complex. We must explain orders of magnitude and scales of time, help identify causal links, and provide elements of comparison.

3 **Reflect on wording and images used**
Carefully choosing words and pictures is crucial so as to accurately describe the facts and convey the urgency. We must avoid representations that may distort reality and understate the seriousness of the situation.

4 **Widen the scope of coverage**
Refrain from solely calling on individuals to take responsibility and action, and consider upheavals as a systemic problem requiring political responses.

5 **Investigate the causes of the current events**
Question our growth model: weigh the role of economic, financial and political actors in the ecological crisis. Remember that short-term considerations can be detrimental to humanity and nature.

6 **Guarantee transparency**
Mistrust of the mainstream media, entangled with the spread of misinformation playing down facts, compels us to carefully review all data, facts, pieces of information given out and experts quoted, as well as to display sources and disclose potential conflicts of interest.

7 **Expose strategies employed to plant seeds of doubt in the public's mind**
Lobbies are actively striving to misinform and undermine the public's understanding of issues, thereby hindering necessary action to address the crisis.

8 **Inform on actual solutions**
Thoroughly investigate ways to act in favour of the climate and biodiversity, be they on a small or large scale. Cross-examine the solutions set out.

9 **Keep training**
In order to grasp the bigger picture as well as the intricacies of climate change in our societies, journalists must be provided with vocational training throughout their careers. Such a right is paramount to ensuring quality of coverage.

10 **Oppose financing resulting from the most polluting activities**
To ensure editorial coherence in coverage of climate issues, journalists must have the right to express their concerns or disapproval of financing, advertising and/or media partnerships when these are linked to businesses they deem harmful.

11 **Strengthen newsrooms independence**
In order to be freed from any pressure, editorial decisions must be completely independent from media owners' interests.

12 **Gear up for "low carbon" journalism**
Lower the carbon footprint of journalistic activities, using more environmentally-friendly tools and means, without refraining from necessary fieldwork. Encourage newsrooms to rely on local journalists whenever possible.

13 **Cultivate cooperation**
Take part in a united media ecosystem and defend journalistic practices keen to preserve living conditions on Earth.

chartejournalismeecologie.fr

Some thoughts on best practice

- Be careful of balance as bias. Hearing “both sides” can lead to inaccurate coverage.
- Bring climate into other “beats”
- Go intersectional - try to focus on gender, POC, indigenous people, poor people
- Move away from political “he said she said” stories
- Avoid doom and gloom
- Simplify the jargon, and use metaphors
- Beware Greenwashing - interrogate “net zero” or “negative emissions” claims
- Link extreme weather to climate change
- There is an audience for climate coverage
- Don’t platform deniers
- Include cost of inaction