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Print media: influencing behavioural responses towards climate change?

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Abstract

Climate change has affected the global population including South Africans. Changes in weather and climatic patterns are increasingly observed (IPCC, 2007a; IPCC, 2013). It is also important to address climate change in order to maintain the production of resources in South Africa to protect the livelihoods of its citizens (South African National Climate Change Response Green Paper, 2010). The media's role is to relay information (in this instance, of climate change) to the public in a way that they are able to understand (Burgess, 1999). The purpose of this research is to determine the way newspapers report on climate change and to determine whether or not these media messages affect public perception of climate change. More specifically this research investigates how climate change is reported in newspaper media; what the effects of media messages on the public are and what other factors influence the public's perceptions of climate change.

This research was completed in Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa between 2011 and 2014. There are a number of research papers which address the relationship between climate change and media in a northern hemisphere/developed world context but there is little research which shows this relationship in a southern hemisphere/developing countries context. There is also a dearth of research which illustrates how the relationship between climate change and the media affects public perception of climate change in a southern hemisphere/developing word context. Newspaper articles were collected from the internet archives of three newspapers – The Star, BusinessDay and Mail & Guardian - between Jan 2011 and January 2012. Thereafter, questionnaires were emailed to 120 newspaper readers with 40 respondents representing each newspaper.

The newspaper analysis shows that climate change reporting has a political focus. The newspapers report on who should be responsible for addressing climate change. The findings highlight that government, the corporate sector and individuals should be responsible for addressing climate change. Furthermore, the newspapers often portray climate change to be caused by anthropogenic activities and infrequently report on climate change as a natural cycle. The newspapers often report on climate change in conjunction with recent weather events that are assumed to be associated with climate change highlighting the associated environmental concerns. The newspapers hardly ever report on climate change from a religious or moral standpoint. The newspaper analysis illustrates that climate change has an effect on various financial issues and the green economy.

The newspaper readers understand that climate change is a natural cycle which has been affected by anthropogenic activities. Media has affected the newspaper readers' perceptions of climate change but they rely on a number of other media sources as well. People have made positive lifestyle and behavioural changes to address climate change. However the readers will only make changes that they can afford and mostly for their own benefit.