

COVID-19 media coverage decreasing despite deepening crisis



The COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread rapidly across the globe,¹ and yet media coverage of the pandemic has decreased since the initial flurry of attention received during the beginning of the crisis in early 2020. Despite this decrease, public attention to the COVID-19 pandemic remains high, relative to the public's attention to other issues, and appears to have largely been supplanted and displaced rather than combined and connected with the attention paid to climate change and other societal challenges. Connections between COVID-19 and climate change, among many intersectional challenges, are varied and complex,² and merit further attention in the public sphere.

The media represent an important bridge between science and society because residents turn to mass media to inform and shape their attitudes, perspectives, and behaviours. The media functions as an important interpreter, from the formal spaces of science to the informal spaces of everyday life.³ Media stories about the pandemic have been found to have substantial effects on peoples' beliefs about its origins, opinions about

appropriate policy responses, and overall politicisation of the crisis.^{4,5}

We found that the proportion of media coverage that mentioned COVID (with terms such as COVID or coronavirus) in early 2020 increased dramatically within 102 high-circulation newspaper sources across 50 countries around the world. This topic emerged as a dominant media storyline just as media coverage of climate change dropped precipitously over the same period across the same sources.⁶ This COVID-19 media tracking was carried out in 11 languages (English, Spanish, French, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Russian, German, and Portuguese) in seven regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East, North America, and Oceania). We also monitored these same sources for coverage of climate change at the Media and Climate Change Observatory, University of Colorado Boulder, CO, USA.⁶

Media coverage of COVID-19 rose precipitously during February and March, 2020, in conjunction with the first major spike in COVID-19 cases (figure). However, media coverage has steadily waned since the last week

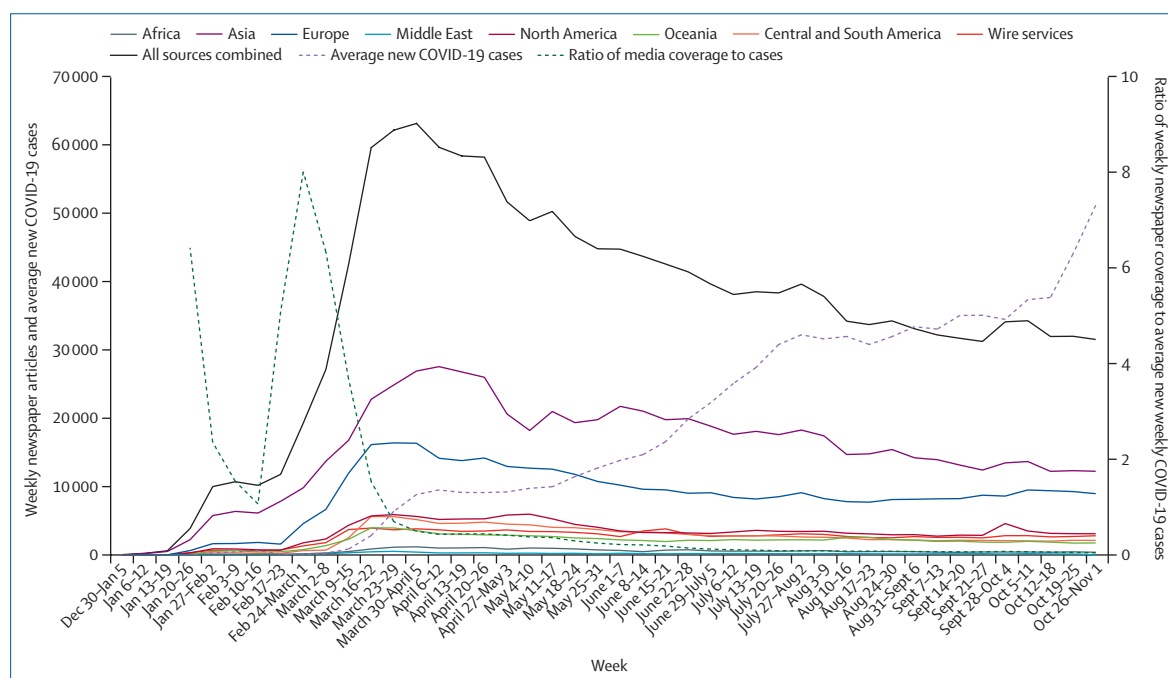


Figure: World newspaper coverage of terms COVID or coronavirus with confirmed weekly new COVID cases between Dec 30, 2019 and Nov 1, 2020
Graph displays weekly coverage of terms COVID or coronavirus in 102 newspapers across 50 countries within seven regions from Dec 30, 2019 to Nov 1, 2020. Average new cases of COVID-19 by week across the same 50 countries from Jan 21, 2020 to Nov 1, 2020 are also displayed.¹ The ratio of media coverage to actual COVID-19 cases over time is also displayed.

of March, despite the continued rapid and global spread of COVID-19 over the months that followed. Along with media coverage, the figure depicts the average new confirmed positive cases by week (not cumulative cases) across the 50 countries included in the media.¹ COVID-19 cases in these 50 countries constitute approximately 85% of total global COVID-19 cases.¹

There are several possible explanations for the divergence between media coverage and pandemic trends, as represented by the ratio of average new cases to media articles per week, including so-called COVID fatigue, an increasingly common term used in public discourse referring to a sense of exhaustion from continually hearing and worrying about the pandemic; other issues displacing the prominence of COVID-19 coverage in a finite news hole (eg, discussions of systemic racism and the USA elections); or general cycles of crisis communication (in which a plethora of new information is discovered and disseminated at first, proceeded by time periods of comparatively less new information to share and other priorities for public attention arise).

We found that the quantity of COVID-19 media coverage is decreasing. Meanwhile, perhaps in support of the second explanation, climate change coverage has begun to increase again during the last half of 2020.⁶ These global-level findings are consistent with country-level studies to date.^{4,7}

Currently, although trending downward, the COVID-19 pandemic still occupies a large portion of media coverage compared with other issues. Connecting the pandemic to the 21st century challenges associated with climate change remains important. Failure to make these links between prominent crises such as COVID-19 and climate change leads to ongoing shortcomings in responses, and inadequate engagement and action.⁸ Some are optimistic that the ongoing nature of the threat of climate change will lead to increasing links of climate and COVID-19 in the media over time,⁷ yet time will tell. This Comment can support ongoing examinations of the content and framing of COVID-19 stories,⁵ and support considerations of the capacity to

respond to science policy collective action problems.^{9,10} Further research is needed to explore factors that can best explain these trends and how media coverage can effectively connect the dots between intersecting and significant crises in 2020 and beyond.

We declare no competing interests.

Copyright © 2021 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an Open Access article under the CC BY 4.0 license.

**Olivia Pearman, Maxwell Boykoff, Jeremiah Osborne-Gowey, Midori Aoyagi, Anne Gammelgaard Ballantyne, Patrick Chandler, Meaghan Daly, Kaori Doi, Rogelio Fernández-Reyes, Isidro Jiménez-Gómez, Ami Nacu-Schmidt, Lucy McAllister, Marisa McNatt, Gabi Mocatta, Lars Kjerulf Petersen, Anne Hege Simonsen, Andreas Ytterstad*
olivia.pearman@colorado.edu

Environmental Studies Program (MB, JO-G, PC, OP) and Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences (MB, AN-S, OP, JO-G), University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO 80303-0397, USA; Center for Social and Environmental Systems Research, National Institute for Environmental Studies, Tsukuba, Ibaraki, Japan (MA, KD); Department of Business Development and Technology, Aarhus BSS, Aarhus University, Herning, Denmark (AGB); School of Marine and Environmental Programs, University of New England, Biddeford, ME, USA (MD); GREHCCO Research Group, University of Seville, Seville, Spain (RF-R); Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain (IJ-G); Center for Energy Markets, School of Management, Technical University of Munich, Munich, Germany (LM); Seattle, WA, USA (MM); Deakin University, Burwood, VIC, Australia (GM); Department of Environmental Science, Aarhus University, Roskilde, Denmark (LKP); Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway (AHS, AY)

- 1 Dong E, Du H, Gardner L. An interactive web-based dashboard to track COVID-19 in real time. *Lancet Infect Dis* 2020; **20**: 533–34.
- 2 Forster PM, Forster HI, Evans MJ, et al. Erratum: Publisher Correction: Current and future global climate impacts resulting from COVID-19. *Nat Clim Chang* 2020; **10**: 1–7.
- 3 Boykoff MT. Who speaks for the climate? Making sense of media reporting on climate change. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- 4 Hart PS, Chinn S, Soroka S. Politicization and polarization in COVID-19 news coverage. *Sci Commun* 2020; **42**: 679–97.
- 5 Bolsen T, Palm R, Kingsland JT. Framing the origins of COVID-19. *Sci Commun* 2020; **42**: 562–85.
- 6 Boykoff M, Aoyagi M, Ballantyne AG, et al. World newspaper coverage of climate change or global warming, 2004–2020. August, 2020. <https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/datasets/ng451j54h> (accessed Dec 2, 2020).
- 7 Lyytimäki J, Kangas H-L, Mervaala E, Vikström S. Muted by a crisis? COVID-19 and the long-term evolution of climate change newspaper coverage. *Sustainability* 2020; **12**: 8575.
- 8 Salas RN, Shultz JM, Solomon CG. The climate crisis and COVID-19—a major threat to the pandemic response. *N Engl J Med* 2020; **383**: e70.
- 9 Gemenne F, Depoux A. What our response to the COVID-19 pandemic tells us of our capacity to respond to climate change. *Environ Res Lett* 2020; **15**: 1–3.
- 10 Obergassel W, Hermwille L, Oberthür S. Harnessing international climate governance to drive a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Clim Policy* 2020; published online Oct 27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2020.1835603>.