

“Big Oil's day of reckoning on the climate is here”



Cars lined up at gas stations across much of the Southeast US after a ransomware attack prompted the operator of the Colonial Pipeline to shut down operations. Photo: Travis Long/The News & Observer, via Associated Press.

May was a fascinating month regarding media attention to climate change or global warming around the world. At the global level, newspaper coverage decreased 18% from April 2021, yet it was 76% higher than a year ago (May 2020) – when global media attention continued to focus on the

COVID-19 pandemic in a finite news hole. Similarly, global radio coverage decreased 27% from April 2021 but more than tripled the number of radio segments in May 2020. Figure 1 shows trends in newspaper media coverage at the global scale – organized into seven geographical regions around the world – from January 2004 through May 2021.

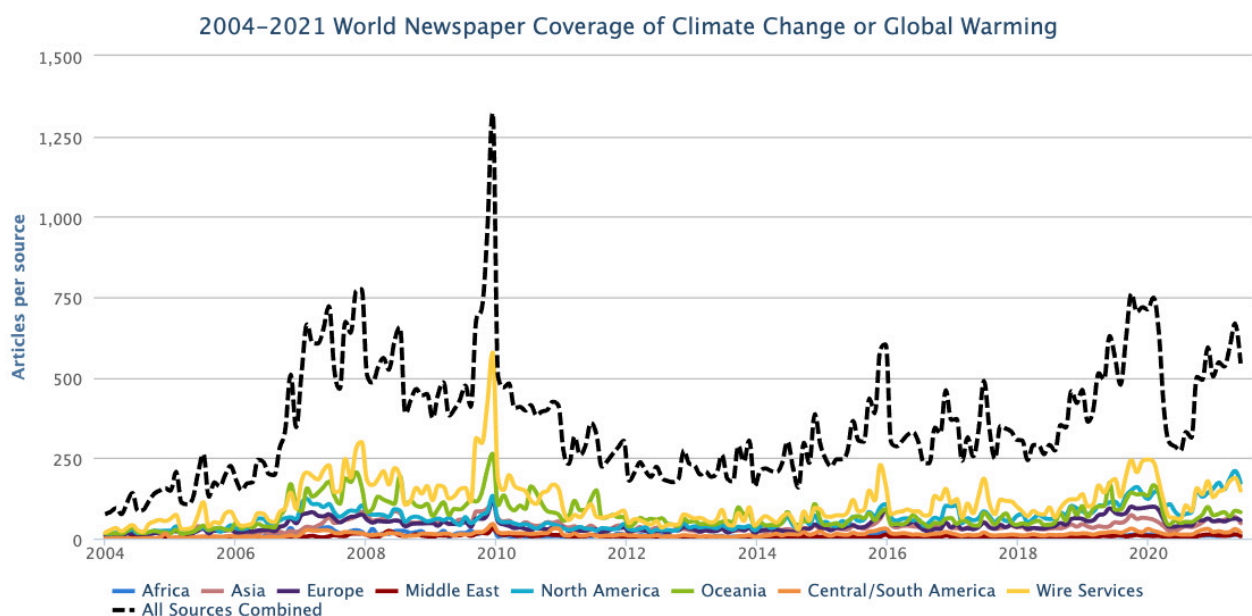


Figure 1. Newspaper media coverage of climate change or global warming in print sources in seven different regions around the world, from January 2004 through May 2021.

Regionally, compared to the previous month, coverage was down in all regions: in Oceania (-5%), Europe (-8%), North America (-18%), Africa (-18%), Latin America (-35%) and the Middle East (-48%). At the country level, United States (US) print coverage decreased 13% and television coverage was down 40% from the previous month. Meanwhile, compared to the previous month, coverage rose in Spain (+2%), Finland (+7%), New Zealand (+10%) and Germany (+16%). But coverage diminished compared to April 2021 levels in all other countries monitored by our Media and Climate Change Observatory (MeCCO) team: Denmark (-1%), the United Kingdom (UK) (-12%), Australia (-12%), India (-13%), Sweden (-16%), Canada (-21%), Norway (-33%), Japan (-36%) and Russia (-53%).

To begin, May was a month with abundant *political* and *economic* themed media stories about climate change or global warming. Connections between the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and climate politics generated several news stories. For example, *New York Times* journalist [Somini Sengupta](#) noted, "The vaccine gap presents an object lesson for climate action because it signals the failure of richer nations to see it in their self-interest to urgently help poorer ones fight a global crisis. That has direct parallels to global warming. Poor countries consistently assert that they need more financial and technological help from wealthier ones if the world as a whole is going to avoid the worst consequences of climate change. So far, the richest countries – which are also the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases – haven't come up with the money. More immediately, this year's vaccine shortages in the nations of the global South could hinder their ability to participate in the United Nations-led climate talks in Glasgow set for November, minimizing their voice in critical policy decisions about how to wean the global economy away from fossil fuels".

Also in May, assessments of emissions in various countries attracting media attention. For example, *Washington Post* journalists [Steven Mufson](#) and [Brady Dennis](#) reported, "China's greenhouse gas emissions in 2019 surpassed those of the United States and the

developed world combined, according to an analysis published Thursday by the [research firm Rhodium Group](#). China's share of global emissions rose to 27 percent of the world's total, while the United States remained the second-largest emitter at 11 percent. India's share came third at 6.6 percent, edging out the 27 nations in the European Union, which accounted for 6.4 percent, the report found. China, India and other developing nations have long noted that over the past century, the United States and Europe grew their economies while generating massive amounts of greenhouse gases, and that requiring the developing world to clamp down on emissions as they industrialize and bring millions of citizens into the middle class is unfair. But with the effects of climate change intensifying and pressure growing for countries to do more to hit the targets of the Paris climate accord, the developed world has sought to make China, India and other developing nations a central part of the global push to restrict emissions for the sake of the planet. Those emissions include six key gases, as well as changes resulting from deforestation and land use".

In mid-May, the cyberattack of the Colonial Pipeline in the US was headline news. The initial set of stories then grew into stories making connections between these developments and a changing climate. For example, *New York Times* journalists [Clifford Krauss](#) and [David E. Sanger](#) reported, "Anxious drivers circled from one filling station to another, gasoline prices rose and thousands of stations were out of fuel in the Southeast on Wednesday as a ransomware attack continued to cripple a vital fuel pipeline...Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, facing his first crisis in the job, said the episode was a test of the nation's ability to secure its infrastructure. "We need to make sure our infrastructure is resilient to climate security issues caused by the increased frequency and severity of weather events," he said. "But we also need to be sure that we are resilient in the face of cyberthreats"". A week later, *New York Times* journalist [Clifford Krauss](#) reflected further, writing "Last week, cars lined up at gas stations across much of the Southeast after the Colonial Pipeline was paralyzed by a cyberattack by a

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criminal group seeking a ransom. The electric grid is also coming under greater stress because of climate change. In the last year, a heat wave in California and a deep freeze in Texas forced rolling blackouts as demand for power outstripped supply.”

In late May, many stories recapping a big day of developments on Wednesday, May 26 regarding hydrocarbon giants ExxonMobil, Chevron and Shell appeared in radio, television and newspaper media outlets around the world. For example, in an article titled ‘Big Oil’s day of reckoning on the climate is here’, [CNN journalist Sylvia Horowitz reported](#), “The future of Big Oil could look very different following a critical shareholder meeting in the United States and a legal decision in Europe. On Wednesday, ExxonMobil (XOM) will face off against an activist investor looking to overhaul its strategy on sustainability. Meanwhile, a Dutch court is due to rule on a landmark case against Royal Dutch Shell (RDSA) as activists try to compel the company to move faster to cut emissions. That could make for a pivotal day for the oil industry”.

Focusing on the ExxonMobil board vote in an article entitled ‘A bad day for Big Oil’, [Washington Post correspondent Steven Mufson wrote](#), “ExxonMobil shareholders voted Wednesday to install at least two new independent directors to the company’s board, a resounding defeat for chief executive Darren Woods and a ratification of shareholders’ unhappiness with the way the company had been addressing climate change and its lagging financial performance. The votes were part of a day of reckoning for an oil and gas industry already struggling over how to deal with climate change. In Europe, a Dutch court ordered Royal Dutch Shell, considered one of the more forward-thinking companies in the industry, to make deeper-than-planned cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. And in the United States, Chevron lost a shareholder vote directing the company to take into account its customers’ emissions when planning reductions”.

Meanwhile, [commenting on the Royal Dutch Shell ruling](#), [Associated Press journalist Mike Corder](#)



Figure 2. Front page from *The Washington Post* carrying front page coverage of the Chevron, Shell and ExxonMobil news in the May 27, 2021 print edition.

[noted](#), “A Dutch court on Wednesday ordered Royal Dutch Shell to cut its carbon emissions by net 45% by 2030 compared to 2019 levels in a landmark case brought by climate activism groups, which hailed the decision as a victory for the planet. The Hague District Court ruled that the Anglo-Dutch energy giant has a duty of care to reduce emissions and that its current reduction plans were not concrete enough. The decision could set a precedent for similar cases against polluting multinationals around the world. Activists gathered outside the courtroom erupted into cheers as the decision was read out loud”.

And with attention on the Chevron shareholders vote as well as the Exxon Board vote, [Guardian reporter Jillian Ambrose wrote](#), “US oil giants



ExxonMobil and Chevron have suffered shareholder rebellions from climate activists and disgruntled institutional investors over their failure to set a strategy for a low-carbon future. Exxon failed to defend its board against a coup launched by dissident hedge fund activists at Engine No. 1 which successfully replaced two Exxon board members with its own candidates to help drive the oil company towards a greener strategy. Meanwhile, a majority of Chevron shareholders rebelled against the company's board by voting 61% in favour of an activist proposal from – Dutch campaign group Follow This – to force the group to cut its carbon emissions”.

Also, reports from the International Energy Agency (IEA) regarding the decarbonization of the energy sector and the limitation of global warming made news. The IEA requested, among other initiatives, that no more investments be made in new oil and gas facilities, that new cars with fossil fuels are not sold beyond 2035 and that global investment in energy be doubled. [Journalist Perrine Mouterde reported in Le Monde](#), “In recent years, a large number of states have committed to achieving net zero emissions in the coming decades. But despite this momentum, the account is not there. Even if all the promises were fulfilled, in 2050 around 22 billion tons of CO₂ would still be emitted. A result inconsistent with limiting global warming to 1.5 °C, a goal that the IEA clearly endorses for the first time. Above all, most of the commitments were not translated into concrete actions. “There is a huge gap between rhetoric and reality”, says Fatih Birol, executive director of the IEA. This year is destined to be one of the worst in terms of CO₂ emissions yet. We produced this report to show policy makers that the energy sector must achieve a total transformation by 2050. Because, until now, many of them have misunderstood”.

Relating to these political and economic themes, many [cultural](#) stories circulated about climate change or global warming in the month of May. To illustrate, heat exposure, pollution and public health relating to climate change generated news. For example, [Washington Post journalist Tik Root noted](#), “As the world warms due to climate change, two studies released this week

show that heat exposure and related health issues are already having an inordinate impact on people of color and low-income communities. One study, published in the journal *Nature Communications*, found that in all but six of the largest 175 U.S. cities it examined, people of color had higher exposures to heat than White residents. “We didn’t expect the disparities to be this systematic,” said T.C. Chakraborty, co-author of the study. Another study, which appears in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, analyzed hospitalization data in California during days when heat waves coincided with elevated pollution levels. The study found that the lower a ZIP code’s median income, the higher the chance of hospitalization for unscheduled respiratory issues on those days. “Knowing where to prioritize resources can hopefully inform policies that protect the most vulnerable,” said Lara Schwarz, co-lead author of the PNAS paper. The new studies reinforce other recent research highlighting environmental inequities in minority and low-income communities. And the authors, as well as outside experts, say they hope their work will bring greater attention to heat as a climate risk”.

As a second illustration, [journalist Alexandra Urisman from El Mundo \(Spain\)](#) interviewed two renowned personalities – Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough – about climate change. The headline was ‘When David Attenborough met Greta Thunberg: We must tell the truth about the weather. It is very worrying but there is hope’. In the discussions, David Attenborough commented, “politicians tell us what we want to hear, but then they do not commit to anything in front of a camera”, while Greta Thunberg mentioned, “I do not see the pandemic as an opportunity, but as a situation that will force us to make decisions”.

Many [ecological](#) and [meteorological](#) dimensions of climate change and global warming were evident in media representations in May. For instance, Tropic Cyclone Tauktae – with connections to a changing climate – garnered media attention. For example, [CNN correspondents Jessie Yeung and Esha Mitra reported](#), “India was slammed on Monday by

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the strongest storm on record to reach its west coast, hampering authorities' response to the Covid-19 crisis in some of the country's hardest hit regions. Tropical Cyclone Tauktae, a storm with wind speeds equivalent to a high-end Category 3 hurricane that formed in the Arabian Sea, made landfall Monday night local time in Gujarat. It strengthened slightly as it hit the western state with maximum sustained winds of 205 kilometers per hour (125 mph), according to the United States' Joint Typhoon Warning Center...The monsoon season has gotten more intense over the years, as climate change has made weather more extreme and unpredictable". Meanwhile, *Associated Press* reporter Sheikh Saaliq noted, "The Indian navy is working to rescue crew members from a sunken barge and a second cargo vessel that was adrift Tuesday off the coast of Mumbai after a deadly cyclone struck the western coast...Tropical cyclones are less common in the Arabian Sea than on India's east coast and usually form later in the year. Experts say changing climate patterns have caused them to become more intense, rather than more frequent".

In May 2021, many media stories about climate change or global warming focusing on *scientific* themes pervaded the airwaves, broadcasts and newsprint. Among them, a *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration* (NOAA) report sparked media coverage. For example, *Bob Henson and Jason Samenow* - writing in *The Washington Post* - commented, "The official calculation of what constitutes "normal" U.S. climate has been updated – and to virtually nobody's surprise, it's a warmer picture than ever before...the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration released an updated set of climate averages for the contiguous United States based on the 30-year period from 1991 to 2020, including more than 9,000 daily reporting stations. It refers to these averages* as "climate normals," and updates them once every decade. Compared with previous 30-year periods, the climate has turned unambiguously warmer". Furthermore, *Associated Press* journalist *Seth Borenstein* reported, "The new United States normal is not just hotter, but wetter in the

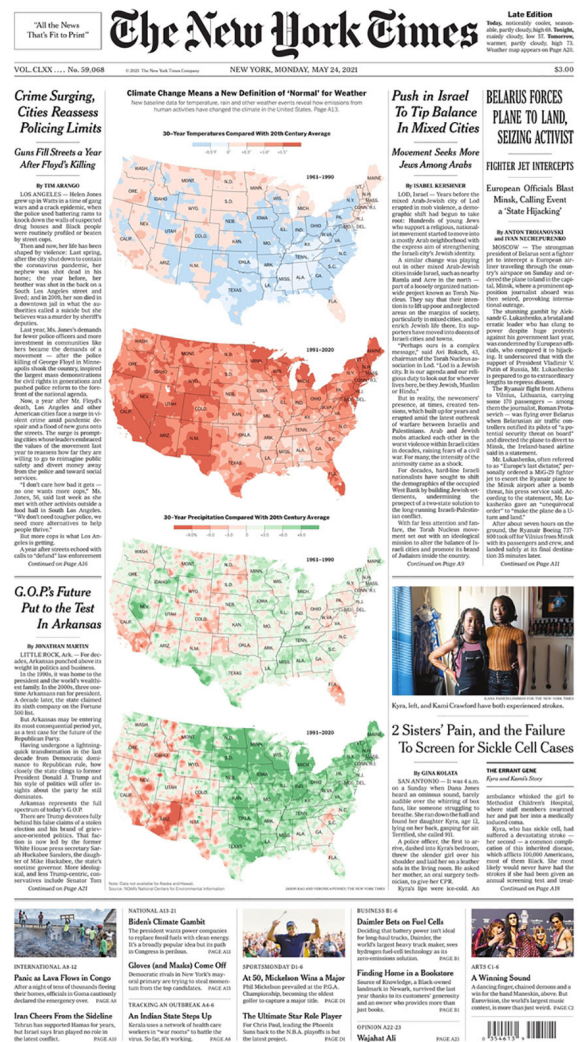


Figure 3. New York Times front page coverage of ecological/meteorological dimensions climate change in the May 24 2021 print edition.

eastern and central parts of the nation and considerably drier in the West than just a decade earlier. Meteorologists calculate climate normals based on 30 years of data to limit the random swings of daily weather. It's a standard set by the World Meteorological Organization. Every 10 years, NOAA updates normal for the country as a whole, states and cities – by year, month and season. For the entire nation, the yearly normal temperature is now 53.3 degrees (11.8 degrees Celsius) based on weather station data from 1991 to 2020, nearly half a degree warmer than a decade ago. Twenty years ago, normal was 52.3 degrees (11.3 degrees Celsius) based on data from 1971 to 2000. The average U.S. temperature for the 20th century was 52



Thank you for your ongoing interest in the work we do through MeCCO. We remain committed to our work monitoring media coverage of these intersecting dimensions and themes associated with climate change.

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degrees (11.1 degrees Celsius). The new normal annual U.S. temperature is 1.7 degrees (0.9 Celsius) hotter than the first normal calculated for 1901 to 1930”.

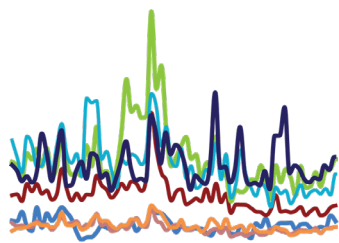
Also in May, a [peer-reviewed study](#) in *Nature* by Roberto DeConato (University of Massachusetts) and colleagues about glacial ice melt relating to global warming attracted media attention. For example, [Guardian correspondent Oliver Milman wrote](#), “The current pace of global heating risks unleashing “rapid and unstoppable” sea level rise from the melting of Antarctica’s vast ice sheet, a new research paper has warned. Unless planet-heating emissions are swiftly reduced to meet the goals of the Paris climate agreement, the world faces a situation where there is an “abrupt jump” in the pace of Antarctic ice loss around 2060, the study states, fueling sea level rise and placing coastal cities in greater peril”.

In late May, scientific studies of methane emissions and climate impacts earned media coverage. For example, [BBC News reporter Justin Rowlett noted](#), “Reducing emissions of

methane gas is vital for tackling climate change in the short-term, a major UN report says...The UNEP report says the fossil fuel industry has the greatest potential for low-cost methane cuts. Plugging leaks in oil and gas wells and along production and transmission lines would significantly cut methane emissions at little to no cost, it concludes. Many of the reductions could quickly pay for themselves because reducing leaks means more gas available for sale. But the report warns the continued expansion of the use of natural gas is not compatible with keeping warming to 1.5C without what it calls “massive-scale deployment of unproven carbon removal technologies””.

Thanks for your ongoing interest in our Media and Climate Change Observatory (MeCCO) work monitoring media coverage of these intersecting dimensions and themes associated with climate change and global warming.

~ report prepared by Max Boykoff, Rogelio Fernández Reyes, Ami Nacu-Schmidt and Olivia Pearman



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MeCCO monitors 127 sources (across newspapers, radio and TV) in 59 countries in seven different regions around the world. MeCCO assembles the data by accessing archives through the Nexis Uni, Proquest and Factiva databases via the University of Colorado libraries. These sources are selected through a decision processes involving weighting of three main factors:



Geographical Diversity

favoring a greater geographical range



Circulation

favoring higher circulating publications



Reliable Access to Archives Over Time

**favoring those accessible consistently
for longer periods of time**