

## “Turbocharge the...transition from fossil fuels”



Wind turbines in a rapeseed field in Sandesneben, Germany. Photo: Jürgen, Creative Commons.

March 2021 saw media coverage of climate change or global warming increase 10% globally from the previous month while it nearly doubled from a year ago (up 92%) when world media turned their attention to the emergent COVID-19 virus and pandemic. While media coverage has generally continued to rise again since the nadir in June 2020, the amount of

coverage – as we track them in 120 sources (across newspapers, radio and TV) in 54 countries in seven different regions around the world – still remains lower than many points in previous years since our monitoring began in January 2004. Figure 1 shows trends in newspaper media coverage at the global scale – organized into seven geographical regions around the world – from January 2004 through March 2021.

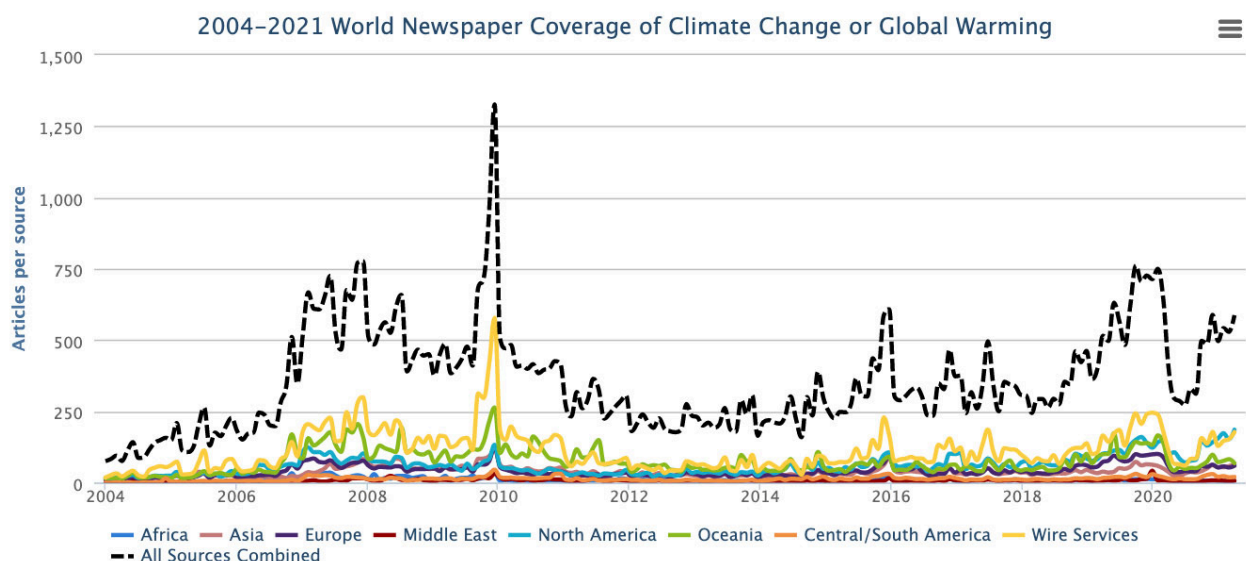


Figure 1. Newspaper media coverage of climate change or global warming in print sources in seven different regions around the world, from January 2004 through March 2021.

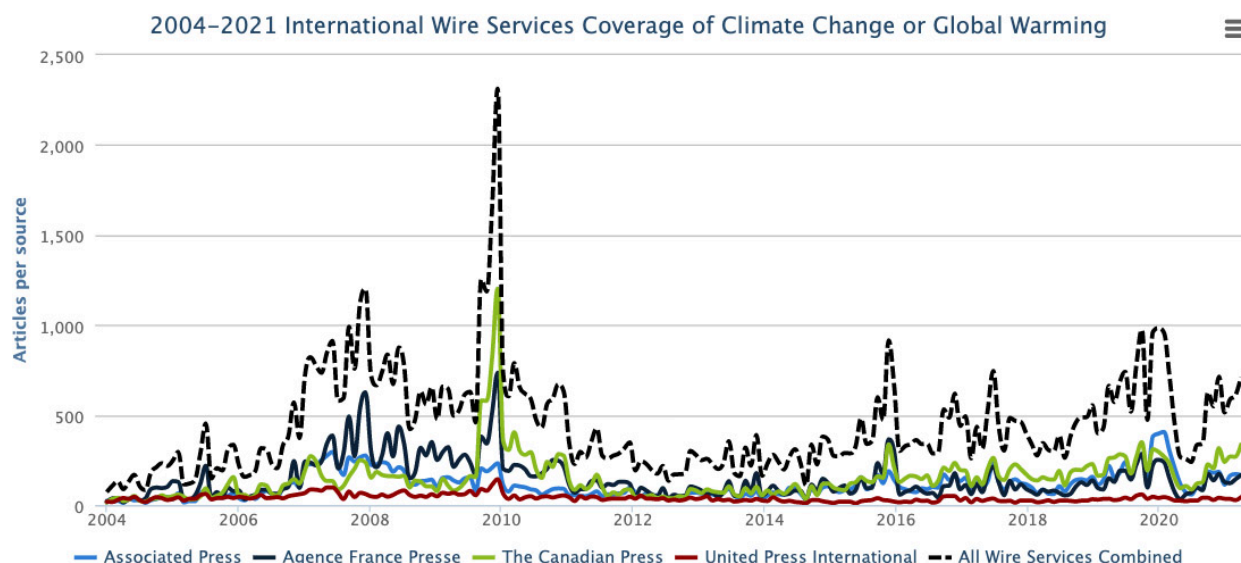


Figure 2. Media coverage of climate change or global warming across international wire services - *The Associated Press, Agence France Presse, The Canadian Press, and United Press International* - from January 2000 through March 2021.

Climate change media coverage in March 2021 was down in Oceania (-17%) and Africa (-10%) but up in all other regions: +6% in Central/South America, +11% in Asia and Europe, +22% in North America and +33% in the Middle East. Meanwhile, media coverage of climate change across international wire services - *The Associated Press, Agence France Presse, The Canadian Press, and United Press International* - was up 16% from February 2021 and also up 61% from March 2020 (see Figure 2).

At the country level, media coverage of climate change in March compared to the previous month was up most in Russia (+50%), followed by Canada (+39%), Spain (+27%), Japan (+22%) and Germany (+15%). Coverage decreased most dramatically in Norway (-32%), New Zealand (-27%) and India (-16%). In the United States (US), print media coverage of climate change or global warming remained just about level, while US television media coverage dropped 11%. Yet March 2021 levels were up 17% in US print and up 50% from US television coverage a year ago (March 2020).

In terms of content of media coverage in March, several **political** and **economic** themed media stories ran about climate change or global warming. To illustrate, in early March the Chinese government's announcement of their plans to

reach net-zero emissions garnered significant media interest. For example, *ABC News* reporters [Huizhong Wu](#) and [Sam McNeil](#) remarked, "China, the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, announced generally moderate new energy and climate targets on Friday that give little sign that it will step up its pace in combatting climate change. On a smoggy day in Beijing, Premier Li Keqiang said the country will reduce carbon emissions per unit of economic output by 18% over the next five years. He was speaking at the annual meeting of the National People's Congress, China's ceremonial legislature that began Friday. The meeting is China's highest-profile political event of the year, where the ruling Communist Party unveils new policies and legislation. The 18% target is the same as in the previous five-year economic plan. The country uses carbon emissions per unit of economic output, or carbon intensity, instead of absolute emission reduction targets" ([see ABC News](#)).

Similarly, plans in the United Kingdom (UK) also generated media buzz. For example, *Times of London* editors [Ben Webster](#) and [Oliver Wright](#) reported, "Britain is halfway to its goal of being carbon neutral by 2050, The Times can reveal, as Boris Johnson calls on world leaders to make binding commitments to follow suit. Greenhouse gases have fallen by 51 per cent against the government's baseline for measuring progress

towards net zero, an analysis of official data reveals. Carbon dioxide emissions fell by 13 per cent last year to the lowest level in nearly 150 years”.

In other political and economic developments about climate change making news, a [new report](#) about ongoing fossil fuel company financing by the world biggest banks (to the tune of \$3.8 trillion since the Paris Agreement in December 2015) earned attention around the world. For example, [Guardian journalist Damian Carrington reported](#), “The world’s biggest 60 banks have provided \$3.8tn of financing for fossil fuel companies since the Paris climate deal in 2015, according to a report by a coalition of NGOs. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic cutting energy use, overall funding remains on an upward trend and the finance provided in 2020 was higher than in 2016 or 2017, a fact the report’s authors and others described as “shocking”...US and Canadian banks make up 13 of the 60 banks analysed, but account for almost half of global fossil fuel financing over the last five years, the report found. JPMorgan Chase provided more finance than any other bank. UK bank Barclays provided the most fossil fuel financing among all European banks and French bank BNP Paribas was the biggest in the EU”.

Similarly, media abundantly covered news of a [survey](#) released by New York University in March capturing the perspectives of over 700 economists’ views on climate action. For example, [CNN correspondent Matt Egan reported](#), “Worsening inequality, trillions of dollars in economic damage and depressed economic growth. Those are the outcomes that economists fear we will face unless the world aggressively confronts the climate crisis. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of economists agree “immediate and drastic” action is warranted to curb emissions, according to a survey released Tuesday from the Institute for Policy Integrity at the NYU School of Law. That’s up sharply from 50% in 2015”.

Then on the last day of March, US President Joe Biden’s \$2.25 trillion (over 10 years) infrastructure



Figure 3. The front page of *The Times of London* on March 18, 2021 with the headline ‘UK halfway to hitting its carbon neutral target by 2050’.

proposal – dubbed the ‘American Jobs Plan’ – garnered high domestic media interest along with some international stories. For example, [Wall Street Journal correspondents Andrew Restuccia and Tarini Parti wrote](#), “President Biden unveiled a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan centered on fixing roads and bridges, expanding broadband internet access and boosting funding for research and development, plus higher corporate taxes to pay for the package”. This story came with the headline ‘Biden’s \$2.3 Trillion Infrastructure Plan Takes Broad Aim: Proposal would increase corporate taxes to pay for fixing roads and bridges, boosting research and tackling climate change’. As a second example, [Washington Post journalists Steven Mufson and Juliet Eilperin reported](#), “President Biden’s infrastructure plan would turbocharge the country’s transition from fossil fuels, using the muscle and vast resources of the federal government to intervene in electricity markets, speed the growth of solar and wind energy, and foster technological breakthroughs in clean power. The linchpin of Biden’s plan, which he



detailed in a speech Wednesday in Pittsburgh, is the creation of a national standard requiring utilities to use a specific amount of solar, wind and other renewable energy to power American homes, businesses and factories. The amount would increase over time, cutting the nation's use of coal, gas and oil over the next 15 years. While 30 states and the District of Columbia already direct their utilities to include some portion of renewable energy, Biden's strategy would amount to the most sweeping federal intervention in the electricity sector in generations. Biden said his plan would confront climate change, while putting the U.S. ahead of its economic competitors".

Relating to these political and economic themes, in March many [cultural](#) stories circulated about climate change or global warming. Several stories observed how climate change will continue to disrupt everyday lives and livelihoods across the planet. For example, [Business Day \(South Africa\) correspondent Kyle Hiebert noted](#), "Discussions about the dangers of climate change tend to focus on economic impacts and vulnerabilities. The pandemic has also illustrated the increased likelihood of new contagions in a world where human activity relentlessly encroaches into nature. The heightened risk for terrorism and extremist violence, however, receives much less attention. One notable study by US economists found that a local temperature rise of 0.5°C is associated with a 10%-20% increase in the risk for deadly conflict. The continent is among those being hardest hit by climate change and already has all the underlying variables that generate insurgencies and intercommunal fighting. From acute poverty, ethnic tensions, and abusive and corrupt ruling parties, to a thriving black market for small arms and vast rural spaces that are barely governed, if governed at all. Meanwhile, climate change is accelerating. National climate policies submitted to the UN ahead of the COP26 climate summit in November are "nowhere near" ambitious enough to achieve the Paris Agreement goal of holding global warming below 1.5°C, according to secretary-general António Guterres. Elsewhere, new research published in the journal *Nature Geoscience* in March has found that spiking heat and humidity

levels in tropical regions are quickly nearing the upper limits suitable for human life. This includes almost all of Sub-Saharan Africa, from the Sahel down to southern Zambia. As climate change worsens, more destructive storms, heatwaves, floods and droughts will render swathes of Africa unfit for farming, tourism, and commercial development. Joblessness will skyrocket. The World Bank has warned that climate change threatens to push tens of millions of people into poverty across Africa, a region where the majority of the population two decades from now will still be in their thirties. This dynamic has been fast-tracked by the pandemic, which might wipe out much of the continent's fitful progress in poverty alleviation thus far. Unable to provide for themselves through subsistence farming or securing jobs in desperate and overcrowded labour markets, unemployed and alienated youth – economically adrift and incapable of fulfilling strong cultural expectations of raising a family – will be vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment by malicious actors. This should sound alarm bells for Africa".

As a second example, [Associated Press journalist John Flesher reported](#), "For generations, Brian Sackett's family has farmed potatoes that are made into chips found on grocery shelves in much of the eastern U.S. About 25% of the nation's potato chips get their start in Michigan, where reliably cool air during September harvest and late spring has been ideal for crop storage. That's a big reason why the state produces more chipping potatoes than any other. But with temperatures edging higher, Sackett had to buy several small refrigeration units for his sprawling warehouses. Last year, he paid \$125,000 for a bigger one. It's expensive to operate but beats having his potatoes rot...The situation here illustrates a little-noticed hazard that climate change is posing for agriculture in much of the world. Once harvested, crops not immediately consumed or processed are stored – sometimes for months. The warming climate is making that job harder and costlier. The annual period with outdoor air cool enough to store potatoes in Michigan's primary production area likely will shrink by up to 17 days by midcentury and up to a month by the late 2100s, according

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to an analysis by Julie Winkler, a Michigan State University geography and climate scientist”.

Also connected to these aforementioned stories, in March *ecological* and *meteorological* dimensions of climate change and global warming were evident. For instance, media accounts of new World Health Organization hurricane naming rules as well as shifting storm patterns and connections to climate change or global warming contributed to increased March coverage overall. For example, *Associated Press* journalist Seth Borenstein wrote, “With named storms coming earlier and more often in warmer waters, the Atlantic hurricane season is going through some changes with meteorologists ditching the Greek alphabet during busy years. But the Atlantic hurricane season will start this year on June 1 as traditionally scheduled, despite meteorologists discussing the idea of moving it to May 15. A special World Meteorological Organization committee Wednesday ended the use of Greek letters when the Atlantic runs out of the 21 names for the year, saying the practice was confusing and put too much focus on the Greek letter and not on the dangerous storm it represented. Also, in 2020 with Zeta, Eta and Theta, they sounded so similar it caused problems...Storms seem to be forming earlier because climate change is making the ocean warmer, University of Miami hurricane researcher Brian McNoldy said. Storms need warm water as fuel – at least 79 degrees (26 degrees Celsius). Also, better technology and monitoring are identifying and naming weaker storms that may not have been spotted in years past, Feltgen said. Meteorologists calculate climate averages based on 30-year periods to account for variations in daily weather. Over the next few weeks, the 30-year average for Atlantic hurricanes is being recalculated by NOAA. That means changing the benchmark for normal from the 1981-2010 period to the much busier 1991-2020 period”.

As a second illustration of ecological and meteorological themed media coverage of climate change in March, flooding in Australia – with connections to a changing climate – sparked attention. For example, *CNN* journalists Helen



Figure 4. The front page of *The New York Times* on March 13, 2021 with the headline ‘Shifts in Atlantic Hint at Danger’ pointed to further connections between hurricane activity and climate change.

Regan and Jessie Yeung reported, “More than 18,000 people have been evacuated from their homes in Australia’s New South Wales (NSW) as heavy rains and major flooding continue to inundate the state, causing some areas to resemble “inland seas”...Though Australia frequently experiences extreme weather events such as floods, bushfires, droughts and storms, climate change is making them worse. The State of the Climate 2020 report from Australia’s Bureau of Meteorology and Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) said heavy rainfall events in the country are becoming more intense, and climate change is influencing the “frequency, magnitude and impacts” of such extreme weather”.

Finally, *scientific* stories about climate change or global warming continued to make up part of the many stories in March. For example, a study appearing in *Nature* by Yi Zhang, Isaac Held and Stephan Fueglistaler found that tropical areas across the world could become uninhabitable in the coming decades without significant



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.

**Our ongoing work is dependent on financial support  
so please consider contributing:**

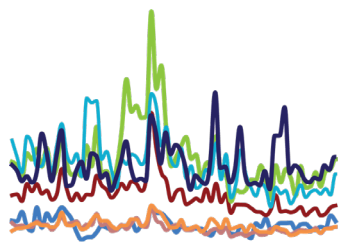
<https://giving.cu.edu/fund/media-and-climate-change-observatory-mecco>

climate policy action to curb greenhouse gas emissions. For example, [New York Times](#) journalist [Henry Fountain](#) wrote, "Here's one more reason the world should aim to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, a goal of the international Paris Agreement: It will help keep the tropics from becoming a deadly hothouse. A study published Monday suggests that sharply cutting emissions of greenhouse gases to stay below that limit, which is equivalent to about 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit of warming since 1900, will help the tropics avoid episodes of high heat and high humidity – known as extreme wet-bulb temperature, or TW – that go beyond the limits of human survival".

As a second example, a [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine](#) report earned media interest as it explored geoengineering research possibilities to combat climate change. For example, [New York Times](#) correspondent [Christopher Flavelle](#) reported, "The idea of artificially cooling the planet to blunt climate change – in effect, blocking sunlight before it can warm the atmosphere – got a boost on Thursday when an influential scientific body urged the United States government to spend at least \$100 million to research the technology. That technology, often called solar geoengineering, entails reflecting more of the sun's energy back into space through techniques that include injecting aerosols into the atmosphere. In a new report, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine said that governments urgently need to know whether solar geoengineering could work and what the side effects might be".

We hope you continue to value our Media and Climate Change Observatory (MeCCO) monitoring and analyses of media coverage of these intersecting dimensions and themes associated with climate change. For more [visit our website](#) or [follow us on Twitter](#).

*~ report prepared by Max Boykoff, Midori Aoyagi, Rogelio Fernández Reyes, Jennifer Katzung, Ami Nacu-Schmidt and Olivia Pearman*



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Media and Climate Change Observatory

# MONTHLY SUMMARIES

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MeCCO monitors 120 sources (across newspapers, radio and TV) in 54 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**