

Foreign reporting on climate and energy issues in German mass media

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In German mass media climate, energy and related subjects seem to be the largest subsection of environmental journalism referring to scientific sources, as indicated by data from the monitoring project “Media-Doctor Environment”^{1 2} run by the chair of Science Journalism at Dortmund University. Environment in general is among the most popular topics in science reporting, second only to medicine, at least according to an analysis of German broadsheets (Elmer et al. 2008³). Also, media attention for climate science, ranking high on the political agenda, is increasing worldwide (Schmidt, Ivanova & Schäfer 2013⁴).

A study was conducted in 2017 to explore how often news items from other countries are included in German climate news coverage, which countries are mentioned or neglected, which sources journalists rely on in foreign reporting and how they compare climate policies of different countries.

Results from a pre-study conducted by the authors in 2016/17 indicated, that only a small portion of articles, which appear in German newspapers and online media on climate and energy, mention other countries. Therefore, we also tried to identify ways to encourage journalists to include international examples in their reports on climate issues. Specifying the forms of sponsorship and support journalists need and find most helpful was another objective.

Three different methods were used to answer these questions:

1. content analyses of selected German print and online publications
2. guided interviews with journalistic experts
3. an online questionnaires for journalists

¹ medien-doktor.de/umwelt

² Rögener, W./Wormer, H. (2015): Defining criteria for good environmental journalism and testing their applicability: An environmental news review as a first step to more evidence based environmental science reporting. *Public Understanding of Science* 1, 16. doi:10.1177/0963662515597195

³ Elmer, C., Badenschier, F., und Wormer, H. (2008): Science for everybody? How the coverage of research issues in German newspapers has increased dramatically. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 85(4), 878–893.

⁴ Schmidt, A., Ivanova, A., und Schäfer, M. (2013): Media attention for climate change around the world. *Global Environmental Change*, 23(5), 1233-1248.

1. The content analyses included print and online articles on climate and energy issues from two constructed weeks (in 2016 and 2017) in 19 German national and regional publications. The analyses of 635 articles on energy and climate issues found that only 118 of these mentioned at least one of the 29 foreign countries included in the study⁵. Only 57 articles (9 percent) described the developments, projects, or activities in these countries in detail.

The majority of the 118 articles appeared in the business section and focused on economic aspects. The main topics were nuclear energy, mobility, climate impact, and fossil energies. The countries mentioned most often were the United States (30 articles), France, China, the UK, Russia, and India. African and South American countries were featured in eight articles each.

Only a few articles compared and evaluated climate and energy policies in countries other than Germany. Ten articles described foreign projects and developments that could serve as an example for Germany. Eight articles highlighted German projects and developments as exemplary for other countries. Thus, the presumption that the media all too often describe Germany as a “clean energy role model” or “climate hero” could not be substantiated.

2. Guided interviews were conducted with 15 experienced environmental journalists and foreign correspondents (print, online, radio, TV). Asked to assess the coverage in German mass media of energy and climate issues abroad, all but two of them saw a serious deficit. They specifically missed reports on how other countries deal with the impacts of climate change, and how they aim to reduce CO₂ emissions. Reporting on global aspects and events – such as climate conferences – was generally perceived as sufficient in quantity, while some interviewees said they were often lacking in quality, although some respondent saw room for more reports on global climate and energy issues.

Asked to specify their preferred forms of support, the journalists clearly favored grants for journalistic research projects. Journalism prizes were never mentioned spontaneously. Several

⁵ 29 countries were included: 3 examples representing different journalism cultures (Hallin, D.C. and Mancini, P. (2004): *Comparing Media Systems, Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge): Spain, Norway, UK; the 9 neighbouring countries to Germany; the 5 countries emitting the most CO₂: China, USA, India, Russia, Japan; 12 other non-European countries: South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Kenya, Canada, Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Australia.

interviewees stressed that grants should not only cover costs, such as travel expenses, but should also include honoraria for journalists.

3. The online questionnaire was completed by 73 journalists. Sixty-eight percent “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that German media rarely report on energy and climate issues in other countries and 48 percent found that global climate issues were underreported. Asia or the Asian countries were mentioned as “neglected” by 32 percent of respondents), followed by European (24 percent) and African countries (19 percent - multiple answers were possible). Ninety-one percent said that there should be more reporting on foreign climate and energy issues in German media, and 58 percent said that they would like to write more such stories themselves.

The main reasons preventing journalists from writing about energy and climate issues in foreign countries were: high expenditure of time without adequate honorarium (37 respondents, 51 percent); high travel expenses (37, 51 percent); and difficulty of selling such stories on the media market (30, 41 percent).

The online survey confirmed that grants for journalistic research projects that also include an honorarium were highly desirable for journalists – 41 respondents (56 percent) would apply for such a grant – while only 22 (31 percent) would apply for a grant that covers expenses only. Most respondents said they would take part in training courses as long as these do not require long distance travel.

Journalists seemed to be highly sensitive to where the money for such grants comes from. The respondents clearly preferred grants from foundations to money from NGOs, and none of them said they would rather receive funding from commercial companies. Ninety-five percent said that articles produced with external funding should identify the source of the money.