

Climate change controversies in the media. A sociological insight.

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NB: This paper is a short summary of the presentation I did during the conference. It mainly consisted in an overview of another international conference focusing on the media coverage of climate change and its controversies. This conference took place in Paris the 20&21 of September and was organised by Stefan Aykut¹, Helene Guillemot² and me. It was supported by the scientific consortium "Climate, environment and society", and by the CNRS's Communication Sciences Institute.

When it comes to deal with media coverage of climate change, people who care about this issue always have an opinion. These opinions are often full of value judgements and consist in assessing journalists' work. Ways media treat climate change controversies often kindle emotions since existential things are at stakes and media are perceived as a central stakeholder.

By the way, the fact that media get such an importance for people feeling concerned with climate change (more than other institutions of socialisation as school, family & peers groups, religion, army, etc.) means a lot about how political and scientific elites shape this issue. Climate scientists would face a new constraint since they more and more have to be backed by a so-called "public opinion".

The international conference which took place in Paris last September aimed at providing with a scientific based explanation of how and in which specific social conditions climate change is framed as a controversial affair. Scholars from different countries presented the main characteristics of climate change media coverage in United Kingdom, USA, Germany, Sweden, Portugal and France.

These presentations were grounded on data produced after years of field works. The core of the methods resides mainly in in-depth interviews with stakeholders and content analysis (qualitative and quantitative). It is indeed worth to study both what reaches a public visibility (which stakes, which actors and points of view, which figures and icons, etc.) and social groups competing to shape the media frame of the issue. These stakeholders, whatever their positions and arguments, have to be investigated in the same way to understand what are their social features/trajectories and the way they interact according to their specific interests, rules, resources and constraints in given social fields.

These methodological insights are closely linked to an original theoretical suggestion. Indeed, papers endeavored to combine sociology of public problems (Becker, Gusfield, Hilgartner and Bosk, Hall, Bourdieu, etc.) and sociology of controversies (Jasanoff, Latour, etc.).

One of the main result of the conference is that consequences of the higher visibility of controversial frames and « dissonant voices »³ in *some* media tend be over estimated (by

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³ We don't use the « climato skeptical » or « climato alarmist » labels but we analyse these taxonomies as symbolic strategies in order to disqualify the rival. Instead, we propose the expression: "dissonant voices".

some stakeholders), at least overtly homogenized (whereas they are highly contrasted from one social universe to another). This is generally due to an overlooking of the “dissonant voices” that leads to underestimate the consistent symbolic work of official bodies, NGOs, environmental experts and scholars, education and cultural institutions, etc. which feed media with a flow of ecological and pro IPCC messages.

Clearly, the case of the USA needs to be considered as a specific one, notably because there, climate change is a strong “dividing issue”. However, Matthew Nisbet, associate professor at the American University of Washington, underlined that the weight of “skeptics” in US general media used to be also exaggerated⁴. Indeed, the assessment of “skeptics” visibility is biased since an “audit” of climate change communication activities” is still lacking.

Beyond this overall result, discussions have also revealed some differences according to countries and to the kind of media. In general, controversies’ frames are more frequent in conservative media and in opinion and debate columns. Dissonant voices have a higher access to general media in US and, in a lesser extent, in UK. They are also visible in some French media (where ‘contrarians’ are mostly national) and German ones (where media mainly deal with foreigner dissonant voices). In Portugal and Sweden, dissonant voices have a very low visibility in public debates.

One of the perspectives raised during the conference was to produce more qualitative data to better understand how people, according to their social background, get informed, talk, and think about climate changes issue. It is worth to produce other data far from opinion polls or barometers which are not scientifically grounded and which bring, thanks to a ‘social engineering’, answers to political interrogations focusing on psychological factors (memorizing, understanding, preferences, etc.). When people have the time to talk and to frame the issue according to their own experience, they provide with ways of thinking climate change far from “representations” grasped by opinion surveys which rather deform the reality they pretend to inform (Desrosières).

Last but not least, the conference has confirmed the relevancy of the following hypothesis: *“public problems give more or less spaces and voices to controversies, according to the different phases of their mediatic career. This mediatic career relies on changing social configurations among groups that define the issue such as scientists, experts, NGOs, state agencies, political groups, lobbies, journalists, and in some cases parliament or court.”* For instance, in France, one can notice that interdependences between environment journalists, climate scientists, civil servants and NGOs which lead to a consensual frame in the media from the beginning of the 2000’s to 2009 at least, are still alive. What seems changing is the monopolistic situation of this specific social configuration. Climate change is now a main topic and a wider range of people feel legitimate to comment it in general media. Some of these people provide with new approaches and arguments which are perceived as original by news producers (as chief redactors, political journalists, etc.) not specialised on the topic, but now interested in it. Yet, as Reiner Grundmann notices, “frames have a staying power” and traditional messages about the reality of climate changes or the need to change our behaviors remain the more constant and the more accessible by a large audience. At the end, and from a

⁴ Adrienne Russelle also points out that during the Copenhagen summit, « doubters » are more and more disqualified by general media (as the New York Times) : Adrienne Russelle, « The United States : old media, new journalism – the changing landscape of climate news », in Elisabeth Eide, Risto Kunelius, Ville Kumpu (eds), *Global Climate ? Local journalisms. A transnational study of how media make sense of climate summits*, Projektverlag, Freiburg, Global Journalism Research Series, vol. 3, 2010, p.325-339

political point of view, what could be “feared” is rather a demobilization of people feeding messages promoting climate change as a crucial matter.