



# Now or Never: How Media Coverage of the IPCC Special Report on 1.5°C Shaped Climate-Action Deadlines

Maxwell Boykoff<sup>1,\*</sup> and Olivia Pearman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Center for Science and Technology Policy Research, Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences, Environmental Studies Program, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA

<sup>2</sup>Center for Science and Technology Policy Research, Environmental Studies Program, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA

\*Correspondence: [boykoff@colorado.edu](mailto:boykoff@colorado.edu)

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Media coverage of climate change has increased since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on 1.5°C, and numerous articles cite 2030 “deadlines” for action. Such messaging can galvanize public engagement, but it might also prompt complex negative responses. As 2030 targets approach, more innovative, co-produced communication will be critical to engaging inclusive audiences.

## Introduction: Here and Now

Today we find ourselves just on the other side of the 1-year anniversary of the release of the 2018 United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on 1.5°C (SR15). We also find ourselves on the other side of a flurry of media coverage of Hurricane Dorian, the UN Climate Action Summit, youth climate strikes inspired by 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, and a “Covering Climate Now” media campaign involving over 300 participating outlets representing a combined potential audience of over one billion people. As a result, September 2019 media attention to climate change and global warming was at its highest level globally in nearly a decade (and US print media coverage in particular was at an all-time high) (Figure 1).

Given that most people (including many decision makers) typically do not start their day with a morning cup of coffee and the latest IPCC report, mass media (including television, newspapers, radio, and social media) provide vital links between science, the public, and policy. Media representations—from news to entertainment—are critical links between people’s everyday realities and experiences and the ways in which these are discussed at a distance between science, policy, and public actors. Everyday citizens rely upon media representations to help interpret and make sense of the many complexities relating to climate science and policy actions. Media messages are critical inputs to what becomes public

discourse on today’s climate challenges,<sup>1</sup> as we have observed in the year since the SR15 release.

## Media Representations of the SR15

In 2016, the IPCC accepted the invitation to prepare a special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels in order to inform the global response to climate change. The release of the SR15 in October 2018 was the culmination of a 2.5-year process incorporating over 6,000 peer-reviewed studies, over 42,000 comments on drafts, and 91 authors from 44 countries. Among the report’s main findings were that the climate risks posed to natural and human systems are considerably higher for 2°C than for 1.5°C of warming above pre-industrial levels and that global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 at current emissions rates.<sup>2</sup>

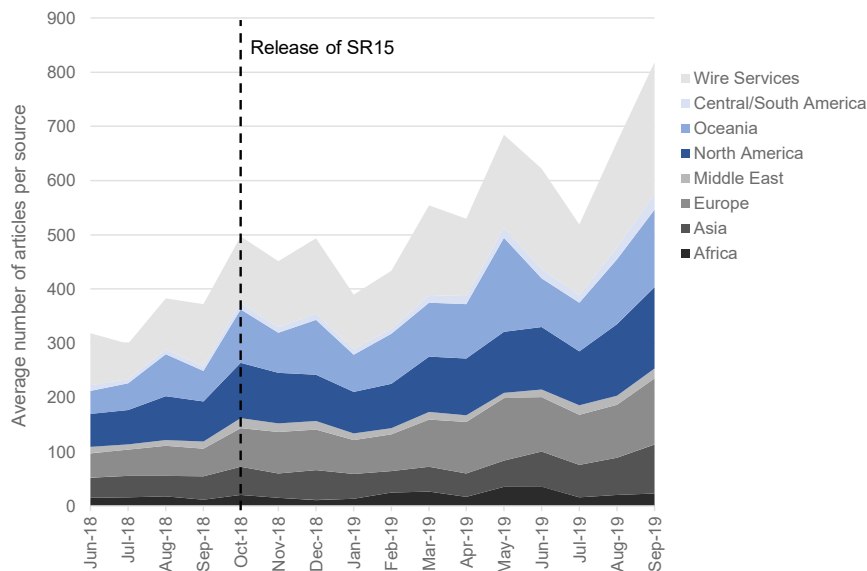
In the month of October 2018, media coverage of the SR15 contributed to an overall increase in stories that mention climate change or global warming by 43% throughout the world from the previous month of September 2018,<sup>3</sup> as shown in Figure 1, which is based on a dataset that tracks mentions of “global warming” or “climate change” in newspapers, radio, and television programs across the world. This tracks with observed media trends from past major climate-related events,<sup>3</sup> including the December 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference and the November 2015 Paris Agreement negotiations, during which

climate coverage increased by 40% and 43%, respectively, in comparison with the previous month. After both of these events, media coverage of climate dropped back down to previous levels within a month or two, whereas coverage since SR15 has continued to generally rise. This suggests ongoing momentum for public discussions about climate change via mass media portrayals. But how have media outlets framed the SR15, and how might these frames have influenced public attitudes, intentions, perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors since the report’s release?

In the days and weeks following the release of the report, media portrayals interpreted the main findings and conclusions in varied ways. Most stories focused on the negative consequences of insufficient action. Many additionally noted a countdown to reduce global emissions by 45% from 2010 levels by 2030 in order to avoid passing 1.5°C (Table 1).

News media throughout the world have consistently used dire language in coverage of the SR15. In prominent US and UK outlets, many news stories coinciding with the SR15 release emphasized a 12-year “deadline” between 2018 and 2030 and the urgency of action needed (Table 1). Drawing on intellectual as well as emotional, visceral, and experiential ways of knowing about this challenge through media accounts such as these, a 12-year “deadline” trope has persisted since the report’s release and has propagated into policy spheres and recent climate activism.





**Figure 1. World Newspaper Coverage of Climate Change or Global Warming, June 2018 to September 2019**

This figure tracks newspaper coverage of climate change or global warming from June 2018 through September 2019 in 83 sources across 42 countries in 7 different regions around the world, as well as across wire services.<sup>3</sup> The numbers are normalized to “articles per source” because of differences in the number of sources tracked across regions (e.g., the database contains more European sources than African sources).

Prior studies have pointed to excessive complex language and consequently low readability of IPCC reports for scientific and non-scientific audiences, as well as a loss of nuance when their main findings are translated by the media.<sup>4</sup> These findings appear to be upheld by media representations of the SR15, where many news stories distill the complexity of the report to simplistic “deadline” messaging. Authors of IPCC reports have themselves sought to maintain the nuance in their findings. For example, report co-chair James Skea noted that the panel “did not say that we have 12 years left to save the world ... the hotter it gets, the worse it gets, but there is no cliff edge.” Report co-author Kristie Ebi also added, “the report never said we only have 12 years left ... this has been a persistent point of confusion.”<sup>5</sup>

The next decade is indeed critical to heading off this major threat of human contributions to climate change. Extrapolating from scientific nuance to news-worthy clarity, large segments of the influential mass media did well to seize on the notion that the next 12 years leading up to 2030 are crucial. But work in 2031 will continue to be vital for confronting climate change. Media accounts

based on the SR15 are giving voice to a collective stock taking on climate adaptation and mitigation. But slippage into a 12-year “final notice” discourse runs risks of paralyzing people who might think it is too late to take any significant action.

### Dangers of Deadlines

These notions of “deadlines” have emerged in recent years in part against a backdrop of “targets and timetables,” including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its set of 17 global Sustainable Development Goals, as well as at the 2021–2030 UN decades on Ecosystem Restoration and on Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. Articulating climate goals, objectives, and deadlines intends to focus and motivate action from the individual to the collective scale, but such goals can have unintended consequences. For example, calls from the 1988 World Meteorological Organization “Changing Atmosphere” conference in Toronto failed to achieve the target of 20% CO<sub>2</sub> emission reductions by 2005,<sup>6</sup> and the target moved. More recently, in 2017, “Mission 2020” was introduced as a six-point plan to raise ambition to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions while

addressing energy, infrastructure, transport, land use, industry, and finance.<sup>7</sup> But 2020 is just around the corner, and this points to a danger of setting and potentially not meeting deadlines. Setting a deadline—albeit perhaps guided by sincere ambition—opens doors of vulnerability and critique, as well as inadvertent political backfiring, when they are not met.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the ambition associated with the SR15, climate contrarians have at times met the “deadline” language with ridicule. For example, prominent contrarian Marc Morano from Climate Depot commented, “climate tipping points have a long history of repetition, moved deadlines, and utter failure.”<sup>9</sup> This also can create space for prominent decision makers and bureaucrats to dismiss the threat of climate change in the context of other acute challenges.

There can be additional drawbacks to overly “catastrophic” and “terrifying” invocations in the public sphere. Recent social science and humanities scholarship suggests that fear-inducing communications produce complex and even contradictory results regarding awareness raising and movements to action on climate change. These research efforts have helped to uncover more textured understandings of the role of emotional, specifically fear-based, ways of learning and provide insights into more nuanced ways to find common ground on climate change.<sup>10</sup> In some instances, emotional appeals can be an effective way to reach traditionally unreceptive audiences,<sup>11</sup> but fear-based communication about anthropogenic climate change can also lead to disinterest.<sup>12</sup> Further, dramatic and fear-based images can raise awareness, but they can also lead people to disengage as a result of feeling helpless and overwhelmed,<sup>13</sup> provoking unintended denial or apathy.

This tension is reflected in the contrast between scientific and mass media communication. Whereas scientists tend to “err on the side of least drama” in communicating about the impacts of climate change,<sup>14</sup> the media often welcome sensational and fear-inducing communication to attract more readers. For example, some of the most critical responses to “The Uninhabitable Earth,” a 2017 *New York Magazine* article cataloging worst-case scenarios of impacts

**Table 1. Illustrative Media Coverage of SR15 and the 12-Year Deadline Discourse**

Source	Headline or Excerpt
B. Miller and J. Croft, CNN, October 8, 2018	“Planet has only until 2030 to stem catastrophic climate change, experts warn” <sup>a</sup>
J. Watts, <i>The Guardian</i> , October 8, 2018	“We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN” <sup>a</sup>
W. Gore, <i>The Independent</i> , October 8, 2018	“We have 12 years to act on climate change before the world as we know it is lost. How much more urgent can it get?” <sup>a</sup>
D. Rice, <i>USA Today</i> , October 7, 2018	“... the world’s economies must quickly reduce fossil fuel use while at the same time dramatically increasing use of clean, efficient energy. These transitions must start now and be well underway in the next 20 years.”
C. Mooney and B. Dennis, <i>The Washington Post</i> , October 3, 2018	“Climate scientists are struggling to find the right words for very bad news” <sup>a</sup>
T. Puko, <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> , October 7, 2018	“Rapid, far-reaching changes to almost every facet of society are needed ...”
M. Marshall, <i>Forbes</i> , October 8, 2018	“... the claim that there are 12 years until the point of no return is at best questionable, and at worst actively confusing. The reality is that there is no such cut off: just a problem that gets worse and worse the later we leave it.”

This table captures excerpts and headlines that exemplify the creation and perpetuation, as well as contestation, of the “deadline” discourse in media in relation to the IPCC SR15.

<sup>a</sup>Headline.

and futures in a warming world,<sup>15</sup> came from researchers and practitioners voicing discontent with fear-inducing framings in the article; they cited hyperbolic “doomsday scenarios”<sup>16</sup> and called the article “deeply irresponsible.”<sup>17</sup>

### Communicating about Climate with Care

In some fundamental ways, climate change has become a stand in and a defining symbol of our collective relationship with the environment. Assessments of its scope and the consequent responses that it warrants make for high-stakes, high-profile, and highly politicized science and policy deliberations. They cut to the heart of how we live, work, play, and relax in modern life and thus critically shape our everyday lives, lifestyles, and livelihoods. Nowadays, “climate change” is no longer thought of merely as an environmental or scientific issue; rather, it pierces our individual, as well as shared, economic, political, cultural, and social, lives. As the notion of climate change has increasingly dominated the contemporary science and policy landscapes, it has also more visibly inhabited public discourse through news and entertainment media representations and “popular” cultures.

The SR15 has arguably sparked increased media coverage of climate change, raising public awareness and increasing pressure on governments to take substantive action. Other climate science and policy currents in the public arena since the SR15 release—debates over the “Green New Deal” proposal, youth climate strikes, Extinction Rebellion actions, and US Democratic Presidential nominees fighting for airtime via their climate-action plans—potentially reflect how media representations (however flawed) can have a sustained influence on public discourse and policy that no IPCC report alone can.

Going forward, media representations examining, interrogating, and assessing progress made in the coming years regarding the Sustainable Development Goals in combination with IPCC reports, the fulfillment of Paris Agreement goals, and larger notions of “sustainability” will be critical. Devoting more resources to the sustained integration of social science and humanities research (along with findings from professionals and science communicators) is vital. These resources can support workshops and interdisciplinary outputs that help expand effective pathways to learning, knowing, and engaging with climate

challenges. As we approach the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report cycle in 2021, there will be a critical need for more creative, co-produced, and innovative ways to meet everyday people where they are on the existential collective-action problem of climate change. Specifically, interdisciplinary efforts such as “Climate Outreach” in the UK and “Inside the Greenhouse” at the University of Colorado Boulder (where co-author M.B. is a co-director) must be scaled up and out in order to more capably meet the scale of these climate challenges.

Here on the other side of the anniversary of the SR15, as we look ahead to a number of deadlines or targets in 2030, we must recognize that although these deadline discourses might have helped galvanize action and raised ambitions in the short term, social science research suggests that this same kind of language can induce fear or disengagement. We must therefore be aware of and engage with the multiple experiential, visceral, and emotional pathways to learning and acting on climate change if we are to avoid motivational collapse on longer timelines and as deadlines approach and pass. Thus, further understanding social science research and incorporating it into the ways in which we communicate about climate are crucial for creating multiple modes of engagement for diverse audiences.

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