

4 Climate politics and science in the media

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4.1 Introduction

The media – old and new – play an important role in political and societal discussions. They report on the political debate, reflecting it, and offer a platform for the societal debate. Opinion pages in newspapers and newsmagazines aim to present a wide spectrum of different stimulating societal opinions, thus fostering the societal debate and clarifying differences of opinion.

But the media also inform the political debate. News reports can trigger parliamentarians to pose questions to the minister in charge or place topics on the political agenda. In a more indirect manner, media attention can put pressure on politicians to place topics on the agenda through grassroots support. The media reflects not only on the political and societal debate, but also influences it to a degree.

Shortly before the Copenhagen climate summit (December 2009) the Climategate affair became of public interest and appeared in the media. After Copenhagen news came out about Himalayagate – the real or alleged faults in the fourth IPCC report (see Chapter 3). The news in the media about these possible climate science scandals gave rise to heated debates in Parliament.

The present chapter describes how the Dutch written media has reported about the topic of climate change in the last four years. This comprises the period from 2006 up to 2009, which we identified in Chapter 2 as phase 5: implementation of the Climate Convention, Copenhagen phase. We analyse articles about climate change from four Dutch newspapers (*Algemeen Dagblad*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *de Telegraaf* and *de Volkskrant*) and two weekly newsmagazines (*Elsevier* and *Vrij Nederland*). We examined what types of events these media give attention to. Do they report mainly about scientific or politically-related events? Do they report more about national or international events? We also map out from what perspective they report on climate change. Do they bring out mainly alarming voices or rather sceptical ones?

In this chapter we show that the Dutch media pays balanced attention to the climate debate. What is noticeable is that it is primarily an international discussion. There is a strong emphasis on the international political discussion about the climate convention. The Dutch political debate remains largely out of the picture. Climate is seen as a technical-scientific issue and not as a political issue – this appears to reflect the depoliticisation of this Dutch debate.

Method

Selection of articles

For the media analysis in this chapter six sources were selected, four newspapers and two newsmagazines. Written, paid media was chosen because they have a full archive via the online newspaper databank LexisNexis (www.lexisnexis.com) for the chosen period. These four newspapers and two newsmagazines represent together such different target groups that they reach an average of the population. The four chosen newspapers are *Algemeen Dagblad*, *de Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*. The newsmagazines are *Elsevier* and *Vrij Nederland*. The chosen newspapers and newsmagazines form a reflection of different voices in society. The selection period runs from January 2006 to December 2009. Starting in 2006 attention to climate change increased, and enough articles appeared to conduct a useful analysis.

In LexisNexis we sought first of all which search terms produced the most hits. The applied search term 'opwarming' (warming) resulted in a total of 1875 articles, 1277 of which ended up being analysed; the other articles did not hold any relation with climate or climate change (for example, 'athletes *warming* up before training' or '*warming* up the soup'). Table 4.1 provides an overview of the numbers of analysed articles per newspaper or newsmagazine.

Analysis of the articles

The articles were analysed qualitatively as well as quantitatively. For each individual article a number of variables was established. These variables are described in Table 4.2. This analysis is partly based on a subjective interpretation of the nature and tenor of each article. In most cases, articles could be classified simply on the basis of the categorisation and classification used. For a number of analysed articles this was less self-evident and a choice had to be made.

The article in such cases was not categorised into different classes, because this would make the weighing per article uneven. An uneven weighing can lead to false interpretations of data and a distorted representation of the research results.

Table 4.1 Overview of used media

<i>Type of medium</i>	<i>Newspaper</i>				<i>Newsmagazine</i>	
Medium	Algemeen Dagblad	NRC Handelsblad	Telegraaf	Volkskrant	Elsevier	Vrij Nederland
Number of articles	174	379	248	417	39	20
Total	1218				59	

Table 4.2 Description of examined variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Description of variable</i>
Date	Date of publication
Type of medium	Newspaper or newsmagazine
Medium	Name of newspaper or newsmagazine
Section	Section within the medium in which the article appears
Title	Title of the article
Author	Author of the article
Source	The sources listed or used in the article
Topic of article	Most important topic on which the article is based
Conclusion of article	Most important conclusion of the article
Category	The type of topic that is discussed in the article. See Table 1 of the Appendix for a further description of the used categories.
Tenor	General tenor of the article. See Table 8 for a further description of how the tenor per article type was determined.

4.2 Dynamics of media attention

In this section we will search for the dynamics of media attention in the field of climate change. How many articles were published in the 2006-2009 period, and how does the attention in the written press relate to events in society such as international climate summits, parliamentary debates and the appearance of scientific reports?

Figure 4.1 shows per month the number of published articles in the newspapers and newsmagazines we analysed. This figure also offers insight into whether the reporting is of an alarming or a sceptical nature, or whether it is undetermined (for an analysis of this, see section 4.3).

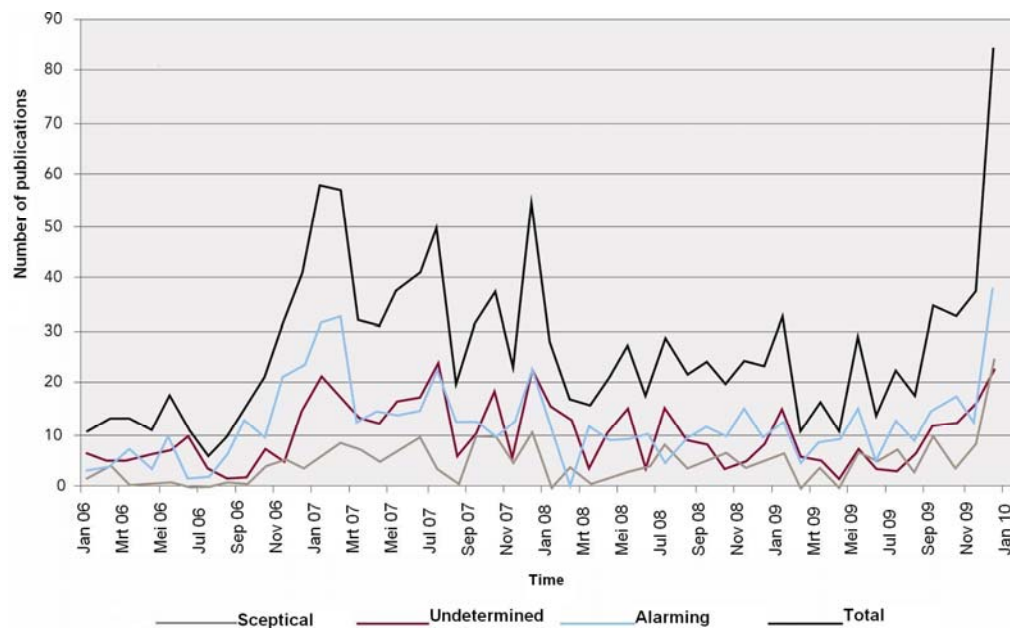


Figure 4.1 Number of articles that appeared in the Algemeen Dagblad, NRC Handelsblad, de Telegraaf, de Volkskrant, Elsevier and Vrij Nederland in the period between January 2006 and December 2009

Figure 4.1 shows some peaks in the media attention. News reports with an undetermined and alarming tenor follow the total line and show a similar pattern of peaks and lows. The sceptical line follows the same pattern but lies slightly lower – thus fewer articles were found with a sceptical view.

Which events determine these dynamics and generate the most media attention? In the examined period we first see a major peak between October 2006 and February 2007. Various international events are responsible for this. In October 2006 the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* by former American Vice-President Al Gore generated a lot of media attention. Next, in November the report of the British economist Nicholas Stern appeared in which he calculated for the British government what the potential financial consequences of climate change are. These events appear to be occurring not entirely coincidentally on the eve of the climate summit, COP 12, in November 2006 in Nairobi. In the Netherlands the KNMI announced in a report that the last fall was the warmest ever in the Netherlands. In December 2006 national as well as international events were reported on. Former President Clinton came to Rotterdam to promote the Clinton Climate Initiative. At an international level the media reported on the IPCC announcement that the fourth assessment report (AR4) would be published in April 2007.

The following noticeable peak occurred in June and July 2007. In June the G8 held a summit in Germany with climate as its central theme. In July *Live Earth*, a worldwide concert with climate change as theme, took place. In July 2007 the documentary *The Great Global Swindle* came out. This climate-sceptical production was a reaction to the climate-alarmist documentary of Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

In December 2007 there was another peak in media attention, especially regarding COP 13, the UN climate conference in Bali. In the Netherlands the documentary *Meat the Truth*, made by Marianne Thieme from the Party for the Animals, came out, focusing on the major effect of meat consumption and production on climate change.

In 2008 we see some smaller peaks. At an international level no major events took place except for COP 14 in Poznan, which can also be seen in Figure 4.1 (in December 2008). At a national level two events took place that were written about several times. In August 2008 the KNMI published a report about the consequences of climate change, and in September a report from the Delta Commission came out. Both events generated some media attention but did not cause a large peak.

In 2009 too things remained relatively calm. This was however the prelude to a boost of media reports in late 2009 about the UN climate summit in Copenhagen (COP 15). In the month preceding COP 15 there was Climategate, the (alleged) scandal surrounding the hacked e-mails of climate scientists (see Chapter 3). This received extensive coverage. In December 2009 the media was overflowing with Copenhagen.

This overview shows that the most noticeable peaks were from news reports about international events of a political nature. Especially the climate conferences (COPs 12, 13, 14 and 15) appear to be determinant for the dynamics of media attention. Preceding and surrounding these conferences many media events took place – *An Inconvenient Truth* before COP 12 in Nairobi, *Live Earth* five months before COP 13. Reports also come out regularly before international summit conferences that present the scientific state of affairs regarding climate change. Such media events appear to want to generate attention for as well as give input to these international climate summits. In this way the dynamics of media attention to climate change reflect the dynamics of international climate politics, including all the problems and uncertainties that go together with an international political context.

4.3 Substantive analysis of media attention

To be able to say more about the content of the examined articles, they were classified into five different categories: problem, cause, consequence, policy and solution. The 'problem' category is generally about the climate problem and about events and opinion polls in relation to climate change. The 'cause' category examines various processes that underlie climate change. The 'consequence' category describes the consequences of climate change for man, nature and the economy. The 'policy' category includes news reporting about agreements, debates and negotiations related to general climate problems and climate policy, reduction of CO₂, and energy and transportation policies to be implemented (see Table 1 of the Appendix). The 'solution' category contains articles about solutions for counteracting climate change or its consequences. Figure 4.2 shows the relative distribution of the articles over these categories.

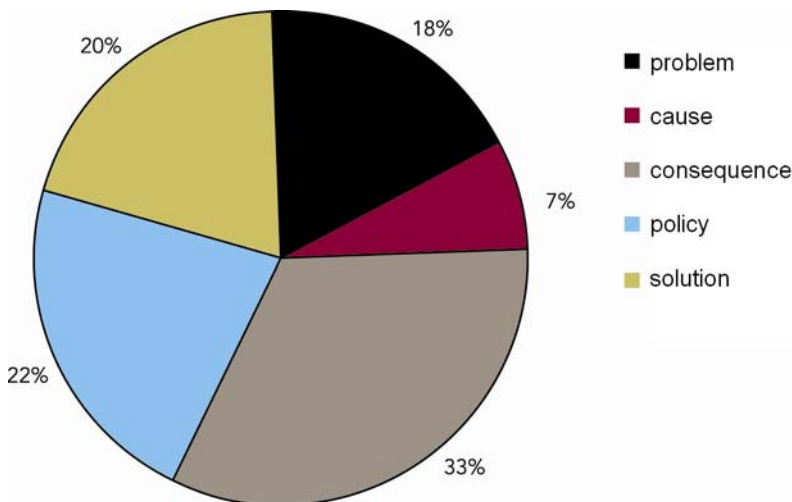


Figure 4.2 Distribution of the examined articles over five different categories.

Relatively little attention is paid to the causes of climate change, the domain of climate science. Only 7% of news reporting is about that. It could be that we have already passed the phase of problem-signalling and the ensuing analysis of the causes. It could also be that scientific articles about the causes of the climate problem are considered as less newsworthy. There are hardly any writings about the causes of climate change from a sceptical perspective.

Most of what is written in the newspapers and newsmagazines is about the consequences of climate change, with 33% of the examined articles discussing the possible consequences of a warming planet. Possible solutions (20%) and policies to be implemented (22%) are discussed a lot.

Searching for solutions and the creation and implementation of (climate) policies is part of what politics is about. Before the creation of climate policies, political considerations and choices are made. News reporting about climate policy reflects this political debate. The policy category appears to be the most divided. Figure 4.3 shows that nearly as many articles with a sceptic as with an alarming tone regarding climate policy are published.

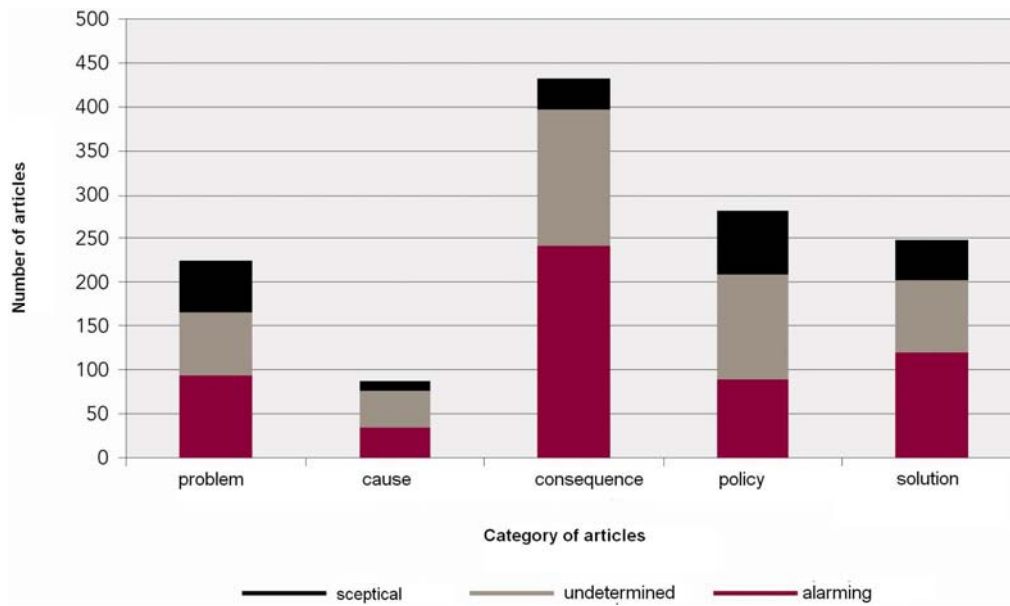


Figure 4.3 Distribution of the examined articles over five different categories.

4.4 Sources of media reporting about climate change

To gain more insight into the sources on which the four newspapers base their reporting, we analysed them for all the articles. First of all, we wanted more insight into the type of source that was used. Does it come mainly from science, from politics or from interest groups? An overview of this distribution is shown in Figures 4.4a, 4.4b and 4.4c. We made a distinction between international and national sources. In the unknown and other categories it was not possible to make this distinction. Give that this category makes up 23% of the total sources, this percentage was also used in Figures 4.4b and 4.4c.

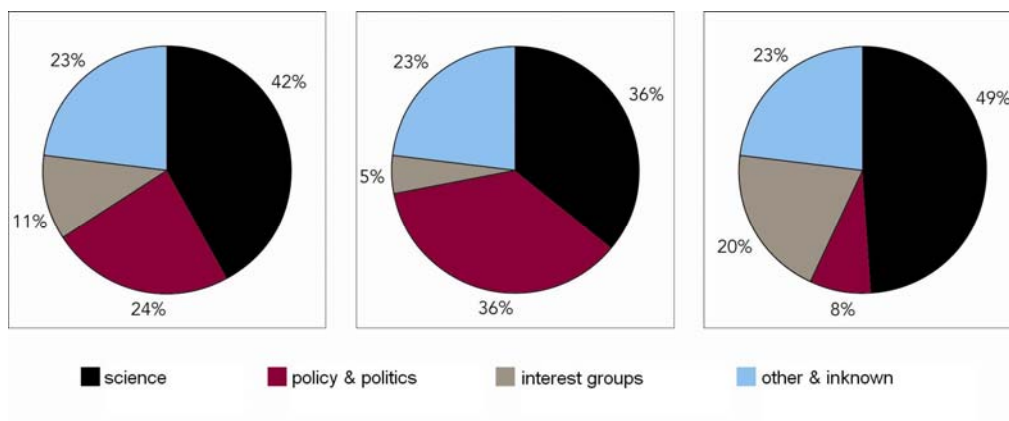


Figure 4.4a Distribution of total number of sources over science, policy & politics, interest groups, and other & unknown.

Figure 4.4b Distribution of total number of international sources over science, policy & politics, interest groups, and other & unknown.

Figure 4.4c Distribution of total number of national sources over science, policy & politics, interest groups, and other & unknown.

Almost half of the total sources appear to come from science. Much is also drawn from the policy & politics category. A relatively minimal portion of the information comes from interest groups. Among

interest groups are representatives from the business community as well as environmental organisations like Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature. These NGOs thus contribute to a limited degree to the debate in the media. Finally, there is a large category of ‘other & unknown’, which includes sources that do not fit in the other categories and articles whose sources are not clear. Examples of other sources are religious leaders making pronouncements about the climate problem or a mountain guide announcing that he has observed the glaciers receding. Compared with the international sources, many national sources come from the scientific field. A relatively small percentage of sources comes from Dutch policy & politics. By contrast, more national interest groups are mentioned than international interest groups.

Although a large part of the sources come from science, they do not produce large peaks in news reporting, as we saw in the previous section. Figure 4.1 shows that those scientific publications which lead to peaks are reports that serve a policy goal, for instance of the KNMI or the IPCC. Publications in the prominent journals *Science* and *Nature* are also mentioned repeatedly. Do the mentioned sources come mainly from policy-oriented climate science? Or is a lot drawn from the corner of general climate science or other scientific disciplines such as economics, psychology and biology? We split these different scientific categories in Figures 4.5a, 4.5b and 4.5c.

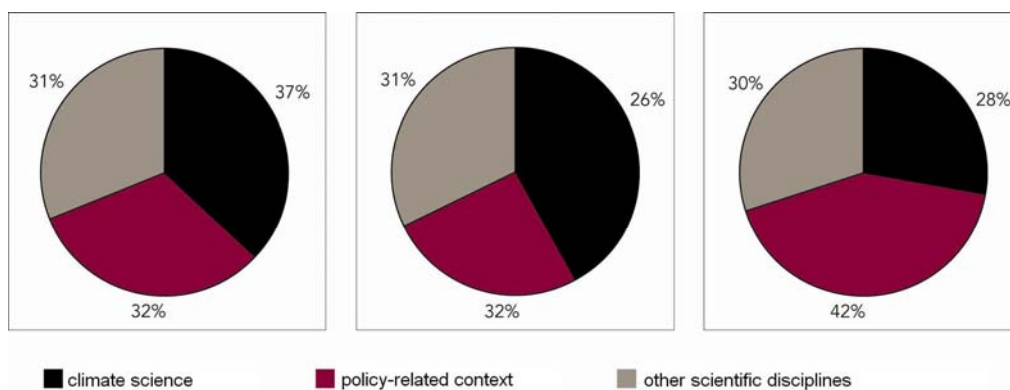


Figure 4.5a Distribution of the total number of sources over climate science, climate science in a policy context, and other scientific disciplines.

Figure 4.5b Distribution of the total number of international sources over climate science, climate science in a policy context, and other scientific disciplines.

Figure 4.5c Distribution of the total number of national sources over climate science, climate science in a policy context, and other scientific disciplines.

The distribution over the three types of science we used is fairly even. Slightly more use is made of academic climate scientists or scientific publications, such as articles in the scientific journals *Nature* and *Science*. Sources from climate science that have come about in a policy context, like the IPCC’s AR4, and sources from other scientific corners, are used practically as often. Examples from this last category are the Danish economist Bjørn Lomborg and biologists who point to the extinction of species, possibly as a consequence of climate change. The media thus use a wide range of scientific sources and present the scientific debate fully. We do see differences between the use of international and Dutch sources. Relatively more international sources from general climate science are used than national sources. A relatively large part of the national sources come from climate science in a policy context. International sources come relatively more often from general climate science.

Table 4.3 lists the aforementioned categories, split into international and national sources in absolute numbers. International climate science is clearly mentioned more often in the media than national climate

science. Articles based on policy-oriented climate science pay about the same amount of attention to international as to national reports. The fact that this ratio is different than that of articles based on fundamental climate science probably reflects the large share of demand-oriented climate research programs in the Netherlands (see also Chapter 3). It is also noticeable that international policy & politics score much higher than national policy & politics. Wherever interest groups are the source of the news reporting in the media, these tend to be national interest groups.

Table 4.3. Overview of the numbers of newspaper sources coming from the different types of science, policy & politics, and other categories.

Type of source	National	International	Total
General climate science	45	117	162
Policy-oriented climate science	69	73	142
Other science	48	90	138
Policy & politics	40	279	319
Interest groups	103	40	143
Other			315
Total			1218

4.5 The tone of the climate debate in newspapers and newsmagazines

Climate alarmists warn that there is a severe climate problem and urgent, drastic measures are necessary. Climate sceptics, on the contrary, doubt the existence or the severity of global warming and usually argue against far-reaching climate policy or find climate policy not necessary at all. In the United States, climate-sceptic voices get a relatively large amount of media attention because of the journalistic principle of hearing both sides of an argument (Boykoff & Boykoff 2004). The result is a 'balance as bias': the small minority of sceptic climate scientists get as much space as their non-sceptical colleagues. In this section we look at whether this is also the case in the Dutch written media. We describe how many alarming and sceptical voices regarding climate change can be found in these media. We also indicate what the ratio is between alarming and sceptical voices, for different newspapers and newsmagazines.

No 'balance as bias'

Table 1 of the Appendix shows for each category when an article is classified as alarming, undetermined or sceptical. Note that 'sceptical', e.g. for the 'solutions' categories, means something different than for the 'problem' category. Pronouncements such as 'the proposed solutions are poor or unnecessary methods to counteract climate change' and 'this solution does not work' evidence scepticism towards the first category. A claim such as 'action must be undertaken to tackle the climate problem' or 'the problem does not justify government interventions' is sceptical with respect to the problem.

Figure 4.6 shows that the Dutch situation is not comparable to that in the US either. Slightly less than half (45%) of the articles is of an alarming nature, 37% is undetermined and 18% has a sceptical tenor. Hence the picture that is formed in the various media we analysed is not purely alarming or sceptical in its totality. The Dutch media thus shows no balance as bias.

But does this also apply to the various separate newspapers and newsmagazines? And to what degree do newspapers and newsmagazines differ from each other in their reporting about alarming or sceptical voices? Figure 4.7 shows little difference between the four examined newspapers. In all the newspapers,

between 44% and 51% of the analysed articles was alarming, between 33% and 39% undetermined, and between 14% and 19% had a sceptical tenor. Among newsmagazines the ratio is different though. From the analysed articles in Vrij Nederland, 35% had an alarming tenor, 60% were undetermined and only 5% had a sceptical tone. The analysed articles in Elsevier were of a chiefly sceptical nature (54%), and only 13% were alarming. Compared with Elsevier, Vrij Nederland does not opine much yet reports rather neutrally about the climate problem.

The placement of an article in the different sections of newspapers and newsmagazines will depend on its content. Relatively speaking, most alarming articles in the newspapers are placed in the Netherlands/international section and the book section. The largest number of sceptical articles are placed in the opinion & debate section (see Figure 1 of the Appendix). In newsmagazines too the most sceptical articles are placed in the opinion & debate section (Figure 2 of the Appendix).

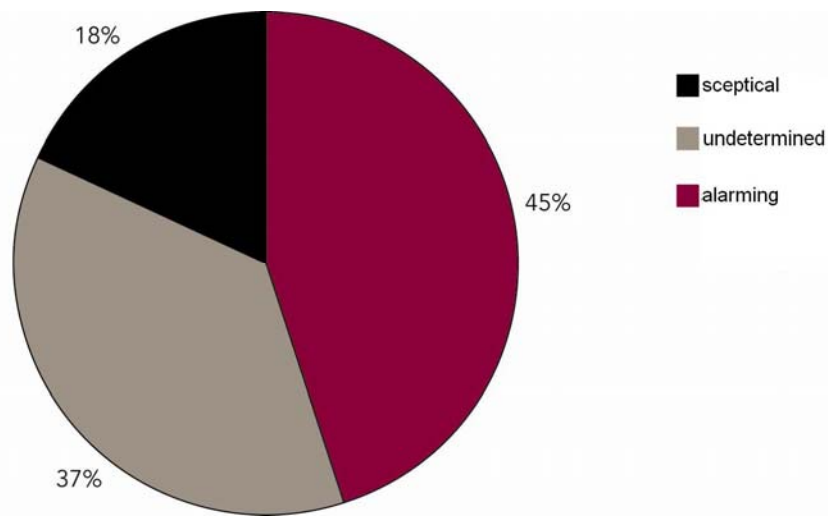


Figure 4.6 Distribution of tenor of the message across all analysed articles.

We may conclude that the climate debate in the Netherlands is conducted in a fairly nuanced fashion in the various examined newspapers. Dutch newspapers present the sceptical voices without there being a balance as bias. The two newsmagazines do take a clear political position in the climate debate, with Vrij Nederland reporting more from an undetermined angle than the newspapers. This is probably not that surprising, given that stimulating debate and presenting opinions is their function. The newsmagazine Elsevier does that merely from a social conservative and economically liberal vision. Vrij Nederland has always had a more progressive character.

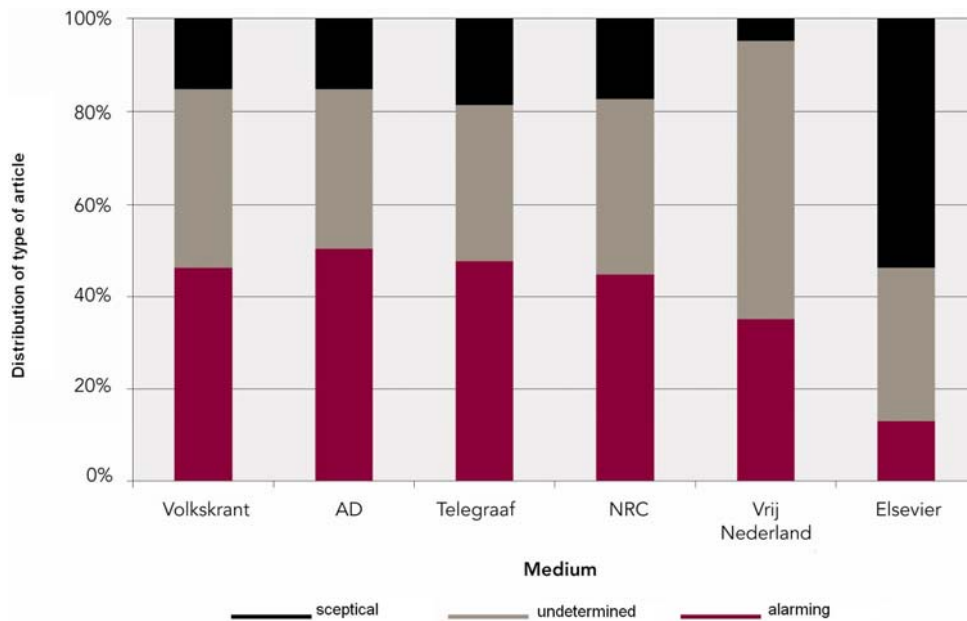


Figure 4.7 Relative distribution of the tenors of the examined articles per medium.

4.6 Conclusion

Looking at how the Dutch written and editorial media have reported on the topic of climate change over the last four years, clear peaks and lows are noticeable. If we split the number of articles from that time according to their alarming, sceptical or undetermined tenor, the peaks and lows in all three lines follow roughly the same pattern. These dynamics seem thus not to be determined by sceptical versus alarming causes, but much more by events around which sceptical and alarming voices can be heard that are subsequently found in the media. The strongest signal in the time series of media attention can be clearly traced back to international climate negotiations in a UN context. The succession of the conferences of treaty parties (in the examined period COP 12 in Nairobi, COP 13 in Bali, COP 14 in Poznan and COP 15 in Copenhagen) dictates the peaks in media attention. Most other events that got a lot of media attention tend not to be of a coincidental nature – they are usually issues such as the publication of reports or documentaries, or media-oriented events that are clearly timed to take place right before a climate summit. Behind such media events there seems to be an attempt to generate attention for these international climate summits and a desire to give input to them.

If we look at the content of the news reporting, we see that it primarily involves consequences, policies and solutions. There is less attention for problem analyses, and the least attention goes to the causes of climate change. The most important sources news reporting makes use of are science (slightly less than half) and policy & politics (about one quarter). Interest groups constitute the source in only about 10% of the news. Although a large portion of the sources come from science, these sources do not account for large peaks in reporting, with the exception of scientific reports that serve a policy goal, like the reports from the IPCC and KNMI. For reports coming from scientific sources, distribution among disciplines is fairly even. If we examine differences in attention between Dutch and international sources, we see that international sources take a lead in climate science. This applies even more to policy & politics. The press pays very little attention to Dutch climate politics – this is not the case with interest groups. National sources appear most often only among interest groups. With respect to the balance between sceptical, alarming and undetermined tenors in newspaper news reporting, we see a rather nuanced picture. The Algemeen Dagblad, NRC Handelsblad, de Telegraaf and de Volkskrant do not seem to differ

much from each other in their placement of articles with an alarming, undetermined or sceptical tenor. There is no deceptive balance in these newspapers, compared to the US, where media studies have found a balance as bias around climate change. The debate between alarming and sceptical journalists takes place mainly on the opinion pages of the newspapers. In contrast to the newspapers, the newsmagazines *Vrij Nederland* and *Elsevier* do take an explicit position in the climate debate. *Vrij Nederland* reports more alarmingly than sceptically about the climate problem. *Elsevier* reports chiefly from a sceptical perspective. It is understandable for newsmagazines to report in a politicised fashion about climate change, given their opinion function and political leanings.

In short: we may conclude that the written and editorial press informs the Dutch public in a comprehensive and balanced manner about climate change and the societal and political debate surrounding it. The Dutch media pay attention to the political debate and the scientific debate, and their news reporting about climate science can be called nuanced. The attention towards the political process focuses mainly on the international debate that unfolds primarily around UN climate summits. News coverage on the Dutch political debate about climate change remains far behind. This lack of media attention for the national political discussion seems to be reflecting the depoliticisation of the Dutch political debate about climate change.