

Climate change: is the media biased?

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In the climate debate, it has been argued that the media is more inclined to inform about what seems to support the fears about future climate catastrophe due to human emissions of greenhouse gases, and less inclined to inform about what seems to go against this. Such a bias might misguide people and become a serious problem from a democratic viewpoint.

Is there such a bias and, if so, is it a serious problem? It seems quite difficult to answer this question. Even if some parts of the media are biased, this need not be a serious problem if it is counteracted by a contrary bias in other parts. One way to elucidate this question would be to see how the opinion is influenced by climate debates. If there is a bias as described above, the opinion of the audience can be expected to become more critical after a debate in which persons with contrary opinions on a question have equal opportunities to argue. As far as I know, there have been three such debates, in which the opinion of the audience has been measured both before and after the debate. Let's see how this opinion changed.

The first debate was arranged by "Intelligence Squared US" in New York City, March 14, 2007. There were about 300 persons in the audience. Three persons argued for, and three against, the thesis "Global warming is not a crisis". Before the debate, 30 percent of the audience accepted this thesis, 57 percent rejected it, and 13 percent was uncertain. After the debate, 46 percent accepted the thesis, 42 percent rejected it, and 12 percent was uncertain.

Also the second debate was arranged by "Intelligence Squared US" in New York City, and it was held on January 13, 2009 for an audience of about 650. Three persons argued for, and three against, the thesis "Major reductions in carbon emissions are not worth the money". Before the debate, 16 percent of the audience accepted this thesis, 49 percent rejected it, and 35 percent was uncertain. After the debate, 42 percent accepted the thesis, 48 percent rejected it, and 10 percent was uncertain.

The third debate was arranged by "Munk Debates" in Toronto on December 1, 2009 for an audience of about 1100. Two persons argued for, and two against, the thesis "Climate change is mankind's defining crisis, and demands a commensurate answer". Before the debate, 61 percent accepted this thesis, and 39 percent rejected it. After the debate, 53 percent accepted it, and 47 percent rejected it.

The critical opinion increased in all these cases. In the first debate it increased from 30 to 46 percent, in the second from 16 to 42 percent, and in the third from 39 to 47 percent. It can be argued that this indicates a bias in the media as described above. This would explain why the opinion became more critical after each of the three debates. Even of this is a small sample, it suggests that the criticism against the media on this point should be taken seriously.

It can perhaps be argued that there is no bias and that it was a mere chance that the critical opinion increased after each of these three debates. This can, of course, not be excluded, but the probability is rather small. It is 12.5 percent, if we assume that it is as likely that the critical opinion would increase as that it would decrease, which seems to be a reasonable assumption if there were no bias. It can also be noted that the changes were quite large; the critical opinion increased by 8, 16, and 26 percentage units after the three debates.

It can perhaps also be argued that the critics are more convincing in the debate. This can be interpreted in two ways. First, the critics generally tend to be more convincing in the climate debate. If that would be the case, it can be argued that if there were no bias in the media, this would have been recognized by the audience also before the debate. Second, the critical side happened to be more convincing in these three debates. This argument is similar to the argument above that it was a mere chance that the critical opinion increased.

Another possible counter-argument is that the media is more knowledgeable than the audience on the climate issue. Even if that would be the case that does not mean that there would be no bias. The fact that the audiences became more critical after the debates indicates that they were relatively less informed about the critical arguments before the debate.

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