



Media Reception and Effects of Extreme Weather Reporting: Opportunities and Risks in Climate Communication

Imke Hoppe

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany

In recent years, extreme weather events have led to more frequent coverage of climate change in many media outlets than it was previously the case. They are seen as chance for making climate change tangible and visible to the public, potentially catalyzing action across all levels of society. However, the reporting of such events also poses risks, for example the skewed emphasis on consequences over causes and solutions. The coverage of extreme weather events also carries the risk that media attention towards climate change fades away immediately once the event is over.

Previous research demonstrates that individuals' experiences of weather indeed serve as a 'sense-making device' for climate change (i.e., "You can see from the many warm winters that climate change exists"). Personal weather experiences are interpreted within the framework of existing attitudes towards climate change and have intersections and overlay-effects with media experiences ('media frames'). For example, the more an extreme weather event is discussed in context of climate change – especially within socially-relevant groups – the more it can affect climate change awareness. The state of research stresses the important role of weather forecasting in bridging the distance towards the issue and demonstrating the personal and local relevance. In this talk, the research question is addressed how TV coverage of extreme weather events in the year 2022 was perceived by audiences. How did it effect the audiences' climate change awareness?

To answer the research question, an empirical study about German TV-audiences, which was conducted in October 2022. It includes a series of focus group discussions (n=42, period 26.-29.02.2022), and an online-survey ((n=1.145, October 2022), representative for Germany, and with a focus on extreme weather events. The results underline that personal experiences of such extreme events and media representations play pivotal roles in shaping individuals' perceptions of climate change. Approximately 50% of respondents reported a shift in their perception of climate change following the extreme weather events in summer 2022, with 37% attributing this change to media coverage. Through exploratory factor analysis, it becomes evident that media coverage of extreme weather reduces the perceived distance to the issue on multiple dimensions. Moreover, there exists a significant correlation between the perceived influence of media coverage and personal experiences of extreme weather events, suggesting a mutually reinforcing relationship between own observation and media portrayal. This reciprocal influence extends beyond mere perception, with media coverage of extreme weather events impacting individuals on multiple levels. The reporting of such events intensifies the immediacy of climate change, making it feel more tangible and immediate in people's lives and those of their closest social circles. Additionally,

it heightens the perceived likelihood of climate-related occurrences and accelerates the perceived proximity of their consequences. These findings underscore the profound impact of media narratives in bringing the issue of climate change closer to individuals' lived experiences.