

Review of media coverage of the U.S. Chamber’s 2014 analysis of the EPA Clean Power Plan: research, coding and search criteria

Research questions:

How does the media cover debates over the costs and benefits of climate policies? It turns out this is a subject of little research when compared to the literature on media coverage of climate science.

We decided to build on what research has been done in this area and in particular examine the question of, “How does the media respond to information that exposes industry claims about the economic implications of climate policy as disinformation?”

Case study selection:

We chose to focus on how the media covered one prominent example of disinformation about the economic costs of a climate policy that remains a focus a topic of national conversation, the Environmental Protection Agency’s Clean Power Plan.

In May of 2014, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce released a report on the potential economic costs of EPA limits on carbon emissions from new and existing power plants. The Chamber [said its analysis](#), conducted by the consulting firm IHS, was based on assumptions about what would appear in new draft limits on carbon emissions from existing power plants the EPA was expected to unveil the following week.

Information challenging the Chamber’s assumptions was [made available by the EPA](#) on the same day the Chamber released its report, leading a fact checker from the Washington Post [several days](#) later admonishing policymakers who cited the report. They “should have avoided using the Chamber’s numbers in the first place,” the Factchecker column concluded. This makes the Chamber report a suitable subject for a case study on how the media handles disinformation about the costs of a key climate policy.

Research method

We evaluated media coverage of the Chamber report based on criteria established in a 2009 [white paper](#) by Eric Pooley, then a fellow at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University:

- Coverage that merely repeated claims from the Chamber report in one-sided fashion was coded as a “1”
- We assigned a “2” to coverage that balanced claims from the Chamber report by citing quotes or information from the EPA and its supporters, such as the Natural Resource Defense Council, or independent experts

- Coverage where a reporter or commentator played the role of “referee,” as Pooley put it, by using their own voice and analysis to qualify or question the validity of the Chamber’s report was coded as a “3”

One limit to this approach was that we found reporting that stuck to the traditional media confines of “balance,” but provided readers with sufficient qualifying information from expert sources to judge the validity of the Chamber’s report on their own.

For instance, an article by Don Lee, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times, covered the Chamber report the day it was released. Lee paraphrased critiques from “some economists,” who said the Chamber’s cost claim “amounts to peanuts for an American economy with annual gross domestic of about \$15 billion.” Another expert cited put the Chamber’s predictions of job losses in perspective by noting, “We added 288,000 jobs last month alone.” He also cites the EPA’s own critique, which found that three-quarters of the the Chamber’s cost estimate was based on the erroneous assumption the proposal would require carbon capture and sequestration for natural gas power plants. Most readers would be able to make an informed and accurate judgment about the quality fo the Chamber’s analysis based on such ample context..

We also broadly examined how information about the potential benefits and costs of the Clean Power Plan were communicated through media coverage. We thought this would be important to understanding of how the Chamber, which focused on making claims about the costs and either ignored or disputed the potential benefits of climate action, may have influenced the overall tone of the coverage.

- Costs: We tracked whether or not each news article or opinion piece mentioned several types of costs. We also recorded whether these costs were communicated in quantitative or qualitative terms, understanding that readers may view economic claims expressed in monetized or numeric terms differently. For each category of costs we entered a “1-Quanti” for coverage where costs were quantified; a “1-Quali” when costs where mentioned but not quantified; or a “zero” when costs were not mentioned
 - GDP: We included cost claims expressed in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) and overall economic impact in this category
 - Electricity prices: included claims about potential increases in electricity bills, costs, or prices
 - Jobs: included claims about job losses or decreases in employment

- Climate: included claims dismissing or disputing the Clean Power Plan’s climate benefits
- Benefits: We also tracked whether or not each news article or opinion piece mentioned several types of benefits. Once again, we recorded whether these benefits were communicated in quantitative or qualitative terms, understanding that readers may view information expressed in monetized or numeric terms differently. For each category of costs we entered a “1-Quanti” for coverage where benefits were quantified; a “1-Quali” when benefits were mentioned but not quantified; or a “zero” when benefits were not mentioned
 - GDP: We captured mentions of overall economic or GDP growth in this category
 - Electricity prices: included information about how electricity costs, bills, or prices could go down (i.e. savings)
 - Jobs: included claims about job creation
 - Climate: included information on climate benefits, such as levels of reduction for carbon emissions, the need to reduce these emissions from their largest source: power plants, and the preventing the impacts of climate change, including many instances in which articles explained the basic rationale for the Clean Power Plan.
 - Health: included information on health co-benefits from reducing air pollution, such as fewer asthma attacks. We did not include opponents claims challenging the health co-benefits of the Clean Power Plan in our criteria, but did come across at least one example of this line of argument in the coverage.

We kept track of whether or not articles disclosed the Chamber’s ties to fossil fuel and utility interests, and industry writ large. We recognized that some corporate members have [distanced themselves from the Chamber’s positions](#) on climate change and the Clean Power Plan in particular, and also that the Chamber does not publicly disclose information about the members of its [Energy, Clean Air, and Natural Resources Committee](#). We wanted to see if reporters and commentators sought to overcome the Chamber’s lack of transparency and disclosure in their reporting:

- A “1” was recorded in the spreadsheet if there was no mention of the Chamber’s affiliation with corporate interests or industry

- A “2” indicates the Chamber’s affiliation with corporate interests or industry was mentioned in general terms.
- A “3” captures mentions of the Chamber’s ties to fossil fuel interests in particular
- A “4” was used to track mentions of specific companies the Chamber is affiliated with
- Additionally, we examined whether mentions of the Chamber’s affiliated with the above interests was implicit or explicit

Finally, we recorded in the spreadsheet whether or not IHS, the consulting firm commissioned by the Chamber, received any mention. We wanted to know if the coverage mentioned the role of IHS, or if they were not mentioned in the media.

Source selection:

We had to limit the number of media sources we examined due to limitations inherent in the online databases we used to find media coverage, and the time and resources available to complete our research. All told we searched for coverage in 22 online and print media outlets and found 61 unique articles. It is worth noting that several of these are syndicated sources, and we found examples where their coverage was reprinted in sources beyond those we examined.

- The Los Angeles Times, New York Times, USA Today, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal and were all selected because they are among the most widely read news sources in the country
- The Hill, Politifact, Politico, Washington Examiner, and The Washington Times were chosen for their particular relevance to national public policy debates and influence within the nation’s capital
- AP, Bloomberg, and Reuters were all also looked at because they are newswire services and their stories are often widely syndicated
- Additionally, local news sources from Pennsylvania, Iowa, West Virginia and Kentucky were included in our analysis. Kentucky and West Virginia were both chosen because they are often viewed as coal dependent states, while Pennsylvania and Iowa are traditional coal states that have shifted toward producing less emissions-intensive forms of energy, such as natural gas and clean energy sources such as wind. We wanted to see if coverage would differ in coal states perceived as being on different tracks in terms of their energy future. Only the top two most circulated papers in each state were included. The Courier-Journal and Lexington Herald Leader in Kentucky, The Gazette and Des Moines Register in Iowa, The Post-Gazette and Philadelphia inquirer in Pennsylvania,

and The Dominion Post and Charleston Gazette in West Virginia were also examined. We did not find unique coverage of the Chamber report for several of these sources, which was an interesting finding in and of itself.

- Finally, Mother Jones and Breitbart were also analyzed because we wanted to include sources that are often considered to be “liberal” or “conservative,” recognizing that Americans who are increasingly turning online for news and commentary will often seek out sources that align with their own political preferences. According to [a Pew study](#), Mother Jones is considered untrustworthy by conservatives, but trust worthy by progressives, while the opposite is true for Breitbart. Less than 40% of respondents to the Pew survey had even heard of either source, which was interesting in that these numbers roughly correlate with the portions of Americans who identify with one of the nation’s two major political parties.

Searches:

- Articles from the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles time, Politico and the Hill were originally found using the database LexisNexis.
- Wall Street Journal articles were found using the database Factiva
- Articles from the Washington Times, the Washington Examiner, Breitbart, Mother Jones, Bloomberg, USA Today, AP, Reuters and all state based newspapers were all found by searching directly on the website of the source or via Google.
- To ensure that those without access to the LexisNexis and Factiva databases can still view the articles, links to the articles on their source websites have been provided in the spreadsheet. Subscriptions may be required to view some sources
- We identified several key terms at varying levels of specificity to attempt to find every instance in which the U.S. Chamber of commerce report was cited in these outlets. The search term “”U.S Chamber” AND “EPA” was used to find the majority of the articles. However, ‘EPA AND \$51 Billion’, “”U.S Chamber of commerce” AND \$51 Billion’, ‘EPA AND Billions’, ‘EPA AND Carbon’ “Clean Power Plan” AND “U.S Chamber””, and ‘EPA AND Energy’ were all also used to find articles. All searches were put aimed to cover articles that were published between May 1st 2014 and June 1st 2015. For articles to be considered, they have to include a reference to the U.S Chamber of Commerce report. These search terms may not have been exhaustive and therefore the sample of media coverage examined is not necessarily representative of media coverage as a whole.