



CLIMATE CHANGE IN CANADA'S NATIONAL MEDIA

JUNE 2021



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About Climate Access

Climate Access is a nonprofit organization focused on building political and public support for climate and clean energy solutions by developing and promoting the adoption of effective communication and engagement approaches. Climate Access draws from social science, best practices in the field and its in-depth climate communication and public engagement experience to make complex issues easy to understand and involve stakeholders outside the “choir” in decision making and supporting policy and program implementation. Climate Access offers strategic framing, narrative, activation and engagement services, and runs a resource and training center for more than 3,700 members from nonprofit, government, academic and community organizations.

www.climateaccess.org

About the Climate Narratives Initiative

Convened by the Clean Economy Fund and members of Environment Funders Canada’s Low Carbon Funders’ Group, the Climate Narratives Initiative supports climate communicators in Canada through research and training, grants, hands-on communications support and peer-learning through a community of practice. COPTICOM hosts la communauté de pratique sur la communication climatique in Québec.

Methodology

The project analyzed climate coverage in Canadian national print media outlets during the Spring of 2021, between the dates of January 1 and March 24. In order to provide a picture of the general state of climate coverage, the cutoff date was chosen so that results would not be skewed by coverage of the Supreme Court decision on carbon pricing. Note, however, that the analysis does capture the period in which U.S. President Joe Biden was inaugurated, cancelled the Keystone XL pipeline and made a series of early moves on climate.

The project includes all stories about climate change or mentioning climate change in news, analysis and opinion in the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Financial Post*, *CBC*, *The Star* and *Maclean’s*, using the [UNEP Live Web Intelligence Tool](#). There were 1,544 stories that focused on or mentioned climate change during the research period. A high-level review of the 1,544 was conducted along with a deeper analysis on a random sample of 200 to identify frames, topics, messengers and narratives.

Limitations

This is an assessment of Canadian outlets operating nationally in English. It does not cover regional media or assess narratives on social media. The assessment does include stories from wire services (e.g.: *Canadian Press*, *Reuters*, etc.) where those were published by national outlets.

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Thank you to Professor Sean Holman at Mount Royal University and communications consultant Natalie Southworth for reviewing early drafts of the report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate change is a significant topic in the national media conversation and there is very little questioning of climate science or the need for large emissions cuts. Climate action is generally presumed to be inevitable and even desirable. However, the coverage is mostly decontextualized and sterile, focused on policy, economics and politics and does not generally present climate change as an urgent or moral imperative that is relevant to our daily lives.

1. Climate is prominent in the national media conversation, less common than health care and the economy but more common than issues like unemployment or childcare.
2. The framing is overwhelmingly positive. Seventy-nine per cent of stories are framed in support or implicitly accepting the need to cut emissions and take action on climate change. Just 7% of coverage casts doubt on climate science or is negatively framed towards climate action.
3. Policy and economic frames are most common. The conversation is sterile and technocratic with climate change most frequently discussed as a policy issue, followed by economic, energy and politics/election frames.
4. Climate action is more frequently framed as good for the economy than bad for it. Positive economic framing is more than three times as common as negative.
5. Politicians are the most frequently quoted or referenced individuals. The most common Canadian politicians are Justin Trudeau and Jason Kenney (though Trudeau appears twice as often as Kenney).
6. Renewable energy and electric vehicles dominate the solutions conversation, though climate change is largely absent from coverage about solutions. It is mentioned in less than half of stories about renewables and less than one-quarter of stories about EVs.

7. Although the energy transition is widely accepted and typically framed positively, the idea of a lengthy “transition” often undermines urgency, especially in regard to fossil fuel use and production. There is not much distinction between growing the oil and gas industry as opposed to existing operations and very little about winding down production.
8. There is a lot of coverage about the United States. John Kerry is as likely to figure in coverage as Johathan Wilkinson. During the research period, Joe Biden is more commonly referenced than Justin Trudeau in stories about climate change.

**COMMENTARY BY PROFESSOR SEAN HOLMAN,
MOUNT ROYAL UNIVERSITY**

The fact that just seven percent of climate change stories cast doubt on climate science or criticize climate action suggests an encouraging improvement in Canadian reporting on the biggest story of our time. Since the IPCC released its special report on global warming, many outlets have even made public commitments to improving their climate change coverage – including the *Globe and Mail*, *Maclean's*, and the *Toronto Star*.

But those news outlets are too often relying on national and foreign wire services, such as *Canadian Press*, *Associated Press*, and *Reuters* for their climate coverage, rather than assigning their own journalists to that beat. Postmedia, Canada's largest newspaper chain, continues to publish stories at odds with climate science. And too many news outlets, particularly provincial or community ones, are failing to show the diverse impacts climate change will have on our society and its members – from policing and housing to marginalized communities and the working classes.

That means there's an opportunity to encourage newsrooms to think differently and more locally about climate change reporting. After all, there's a lot Canadians still don't know about what will happen if we don't respond to climate change with the urgency it demands. Making that information more available could help communities better see how they will be impacted by global warming, mobilizing them, as well as influencing their decision making at the ballot box and the checkout line.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Inject urgency

The debate is over and the national media overwhelmingly accepts the need to cut emissions. The current narrative is about how and how fast. *Emphasize urgency.*

- Climate change is getting worse and stronger action is necessary.
- The U.S. and Europeans are cutting climate pollution and Canada is not. Canada's emissions are high, not going down; Canada is still planning to increase fossil fuel production.
- Canada doesn't have important programs in place e.g.: transition for oil-dependent workers and communities, laws to phase out gasoline vehicles.

Inject values

The conversation is largely technocratic and political. It is focused on policy, horse race politics and economics. *Make it a moral imperative about people and values (including Canadian values of leadership and doing our fair share).*

- Canada can't keep letting emissions go up, for the sake of the planet, our children and grandchildren.
- We need to act now to support Canadian workers and communities.
- We've got to do our fair share to protect impacted, vulnerable and marginalized people.

Flip the script on transition

The energy transition is widely accepted but often presented in a way that undermines the imperative to phase out fossil fuels and cut GHG emissions. *Inject values and urgency in transition narratives.*

- The world is transitioning to clean energy now, not in the future, there's no time to waste.
- Canadians are ready for this shift off of oil and gas. They know solutions exist and will continue to become more available.
- 'Transition' can't mean 'delay.'

Remove abstractions: make the “transition” and use of fossil fuels tangible

Spell out the causes of climate change that people interact with in their daily lives: oil and natural gas in vehicles and buildings. *Embody momentum for the relevant solutions: electrifying buildings, cars & trucks.*

- 75% of Canadians want more renewable power and clean technologies like electric vehicles.
- 50,000 jobs are likely to be lost in fossil fuels over the next decade, while just over 160,000 will be created in clean energy.

Use Biden administration as contrast

U.S. climate action is getting significant coverage in the national media, creating a major opportunity for communicators. *Highlight tangible examples of the U.S. moving more aggressively to clean energy.*

- The U.S. has been cutting climate pollution over the past 20 years while Canada hasn't.
- Highlight tangible examples of the U.S. moving more aggressively to clean energy, e.g.: the state of Texas has built more wind power than all of Canada.
- The U.S. has tougher goals for carbon cuts than Canada.

Extreme weather

Weather and climate impacts make climate change tangible for the public. *Use impacts to emphasize the key concepts of proximity, urgency and the need for collective action.*

- Use extreme weather as an entry point.
- Name the connection to climate change and that the cause is burning fossil fuels.
- Pivot to describe tangible solutions to prepare for change and take action.

Support and amplify a diversity of voices

Amplify messengers that speak with moral authority; feature lived experience and local expertise (e.g. community leaders, people impacted by extreme weather and people leading climate solutions).

- Look outside of the “usual suspects” or party-affiliated.
- Seek messengers that are knowledgeable, truthful, ethical.
- Consider gender representation.
- Choose messengers that are specific to target audiences and leaders in their networks.

HOW BIG AN ISSUE IS CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE NATIONAL MEDIA?

Climate change is a significant topic in the national media conversation. However, climate change was dwarfed by COVID during the spring of 2021, like all other issues.

COVID DOMINATES COVERAGE

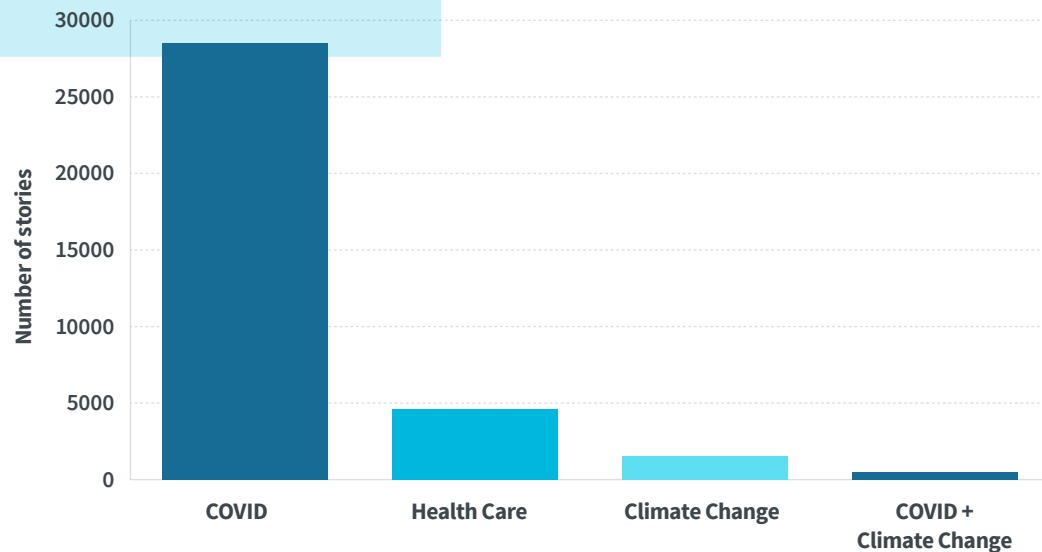


FIGURE 1. The UN Web Intelligence tool was used to find the number of stories that mentioned COVID (28,484), healthcare (4,590), Climate Change (1,554), and COVID AND Climate change (511), Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

Even during the pandemic, climate change received significant coverage – less than health care or the economy (or hockey) but significantly more than issues like unemployment or childcare.

It’s notable that there was more mention of climate change in the national media than there was about pipelines even though this was the period when President Biden cancelled Keystone XL and several other pipeline controversies were prominent.

HOW BIG AN ISSUE IS CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE NATIONAL MEDIA?

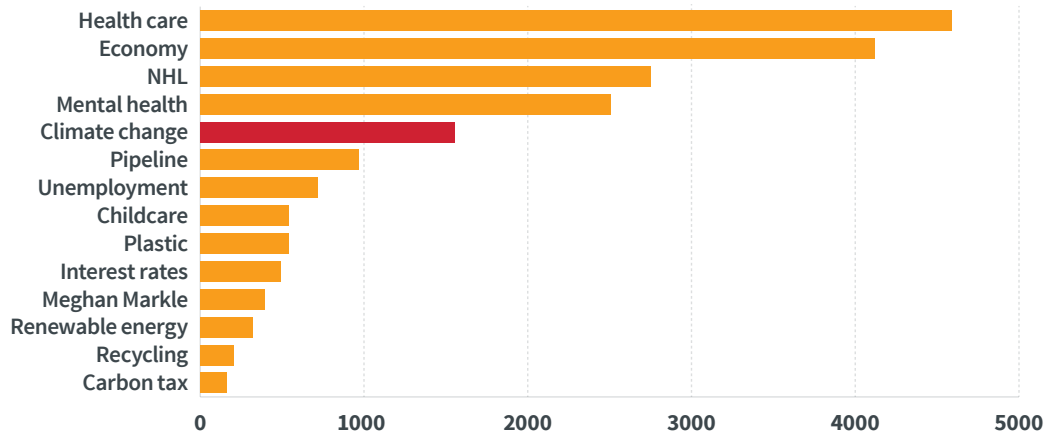


FIGURE 2. Stories that mention climate change compared to other key issues based on a search using the UN Web Intelligence tool, Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

Climate change is both a topic in its own right and also permeates other coverage. Roughly half the mentions of climate change in the national media are stories focused on some aspect of the issue while another half are stories focused primarily on other topics but where climate is mentioned as a related issue.

STORIES FOCUSED ON CLIMATE CHANGE VS MENTIONED IN PASSING

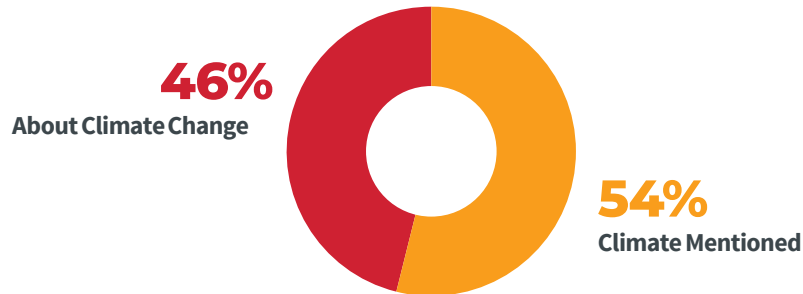


FIGURE 3. Stories that are climate focused versus mention climate, based on detailed analysis of a random sample of climate coverage, Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

FRAMING IS POSITIVE

The framing of climate coverage is overwhelmingly positive and while there are still some opinion pieces pushing negative storylines, these are rare in percentage terms.

Seventy-nine per cent of stories are framed as either supportive or implicitly accepting the need to cut emissions and take action on climate change. Only 14% of the coverage presents arguments or quotes for and against action. Just 7% of coverage actively casts doubt on climate science or has a strongly negative frame towards climate action.

Note that a positive frame does not mean that coverage is actively promoting or “cheerleading” for climate action. Positive coverage often means that stories simply take the need for climate action for granted or treat it as inevitable.

CLIMATE ACTION BROADLY ACCEPTED BY NATIONAL MEDIA

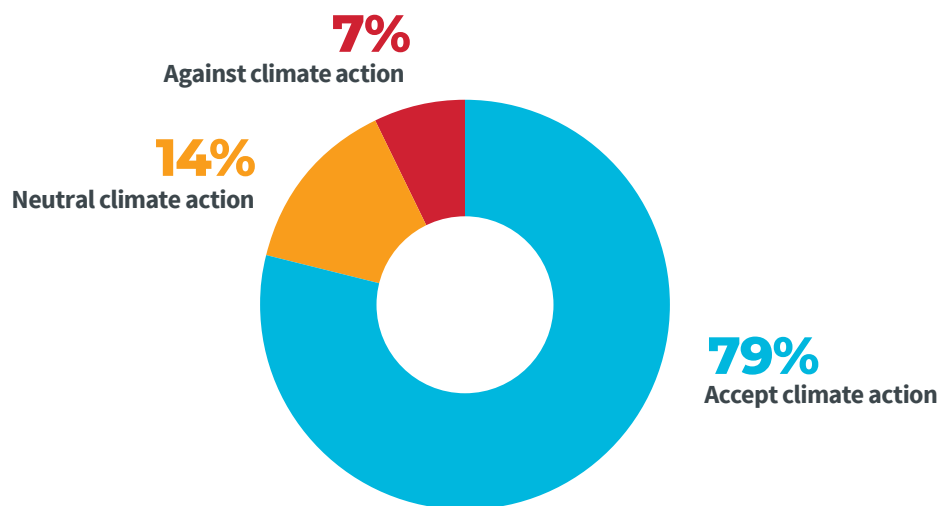


FIGURE 4. Percentage of stories that treat climate action positively (or accept it without question) compared to neutral (“both-sidesism”) and anti-climate action. Based on detailed analysis of a random sample of climate coverage Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

The positive framing holds across media outlets. It's notable that, although Postmedia covers climate change least frequently and is the most likely to publish stories framed against climate action, overall coverage in the *National Post* is still about 70% accepting of climate action and science. This includes stories from wire services like the *Canadian* and *Associated Press* or republished from *Bloomberg News*.

Economic framing is also positive

When the national media addresses the question of whether action on climate change will hurt the economy, coverage is much more likely to be framed as good than bad for the economy.

This overall economic framing includes stories about broad economic and job impacts of climate action as well as more focused stories about companies that are finding revenue in low-carbon businesses or stories about sectors, products and technologies (e.g. hydrogen) which are presented as economic opportunities.

Positive economic framing is more than three times as common as negative.

CLIMATE ACTION AND THE ECONOMY IN NATIONAL MEDIA

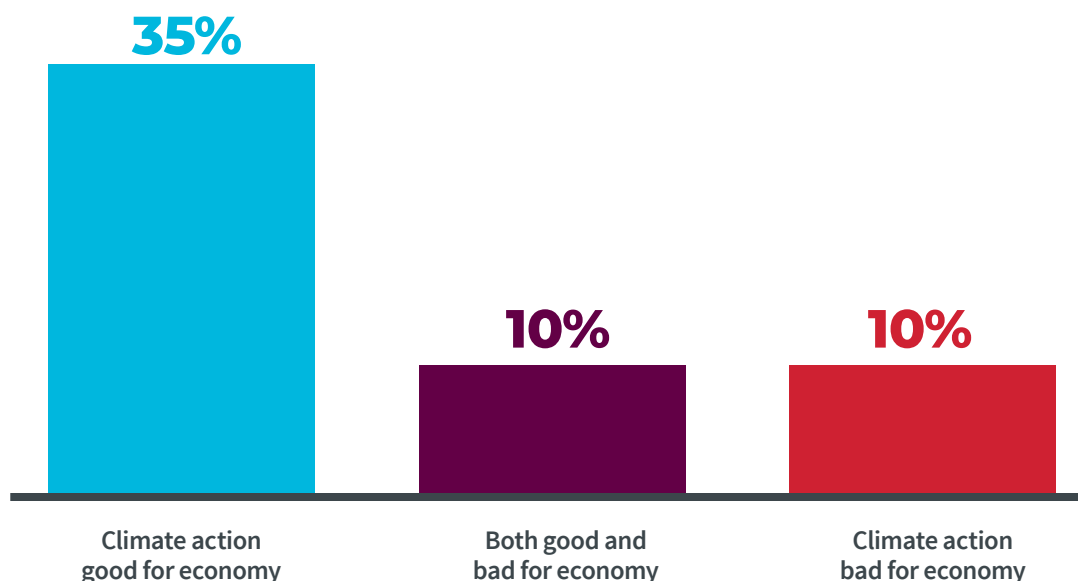


FIGURE 5. Economic implications of climate action based on detailed analysis of a random sample of climate coverage, Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021. Note: the chart does not add up to 100% because not all stories address the question of economic impacts or opportunities.

DOMINANT FRAMES

Although climate coverage is generally positive, it is most frequently presented in a sterile and technocratic manner in the national media. Policy and economic frames dominate. Climate coverage is mostly decontextualized and not presented as an urgent or moral imperative.

Climate change is most commonly discussed as a policy issue, followed by economic, energy and politics/election frames. Note that we distinguish between coverage of policies such as targets and regulations versus coverage in terms of politics e.g.: whether a climate issue favours the governing Liberals or opposition Conservatives.

Less than 30% of the time, climate change is discussed as something that hurts people. Issues of climate justice or Indigenous rights are covered in less than 20% of stories.

Extreme weather linked to climate change and stories about climate science are even less frequent than coverage about human impacts.

Frames are the assumptions and perspectives that shape a media story. They are often unstated.

“A frame is a guide. It directs people where to look, but more importantly, helps them interpret what they see. Every message – whether written, spoken, illustrated, or signed – is presented through a frame of some kind. Simply put, every communication is framed.”

- [Frameworks Institute, 2020](#)

DOMINANT FRAMES, CLIMATE STORIES IN NATIONAL MEDIA

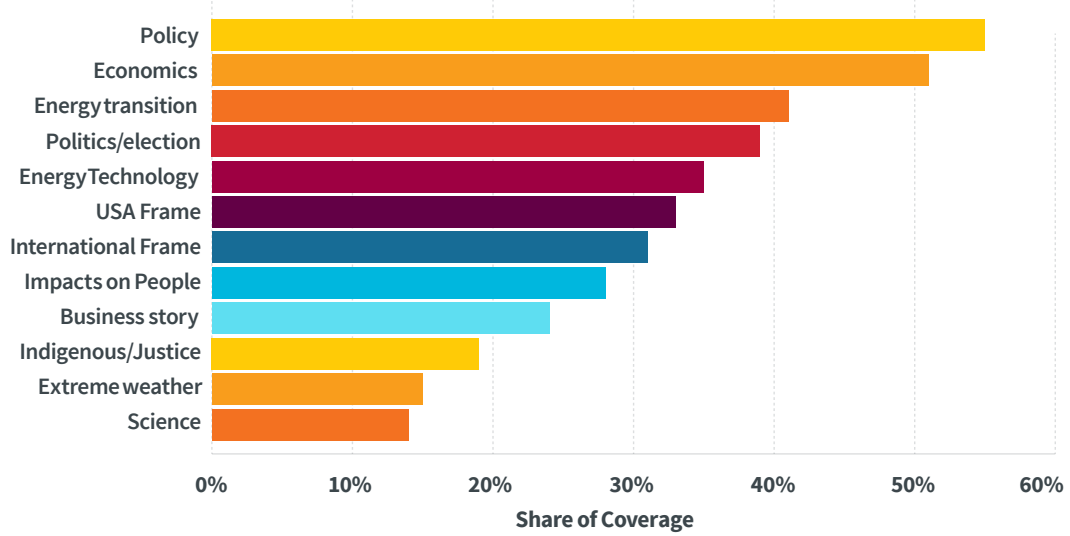


FIGURE 6. Most common frames based on detailed analysis of a random sample of climate coverage, Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021. Note: since stories can have multiple frames, the chart totals do not add up to 100%.



DOMINANT TOPICS

Climate coverage most commonly focuses on what politicians are saying and doing, including very significant coverage of U.S. politicians. The high level of interest in U.S. climate politics may be because of the transition from Trump to Biden and the Biden administration's early burst of activity on climate change.

Renewable energy is the second most common topic mentioned in national media stories. Issues of justice, adaptation and health were much less frequent.

DOMINANT TOPICS, CLIMATE STORIES IN NATIONAL MEDIA

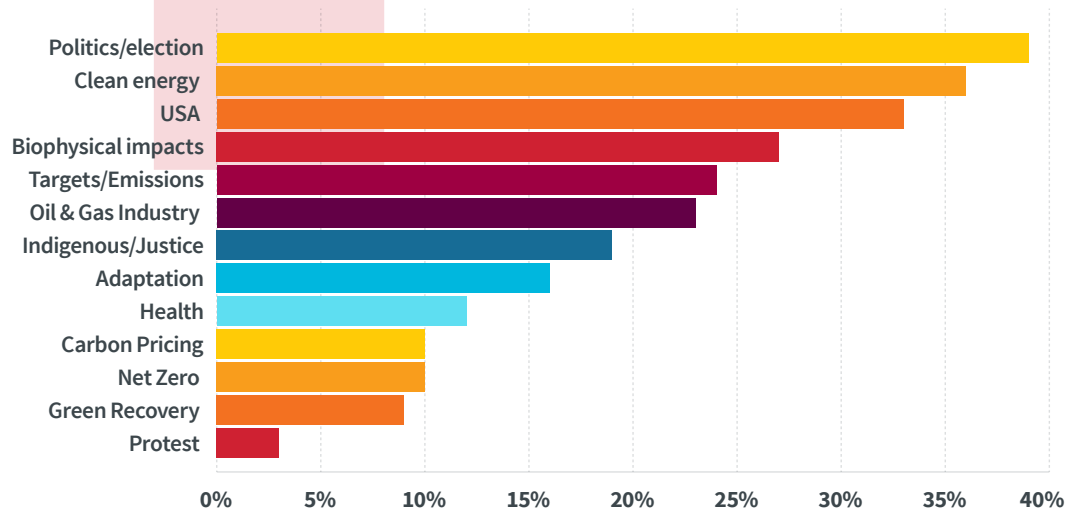


FIGURE 7. Dominant topics based on detailed analysis of a random sample of climate coverage, Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

Interestingly, carbon pricing and the carbon tax did not dominate national media coverage. Note that we deliberately ended the analysis before the Supreme Court decision on carbon pricing in order to present a description of the typical media conversation on climate change. The period also does not include the new Canadian targets announced at the leaders summit on climate hosted by the U.S.

MOST PROMINENT PEOPLE

The most prominent individuals in climate stories are politicians. In the Spring of 2021, Joe Biden actually outpaced Justin Trudeau by a significant margin although that may have been an anomaly due to the end of the Trump administration and reporting on Biden’s early push on climate.

While it’s to be expected that national media focus on prominent political figures, it’s worth noting that they are not the most trusted climate messengers outside of entrenched political identities.

Although women are more concerned about climate change than men and constitute a crucial audience, messengers are mostly white men as are the people referenced in media coverage. Greta Thunberg is the most prominent break in the pattern – she was cited or quoted more frequently than any Canadian environmental group, industry representative or female politician.

PEOPLE QUOTED OR REFERENCED IN NATIONAL MEDIA

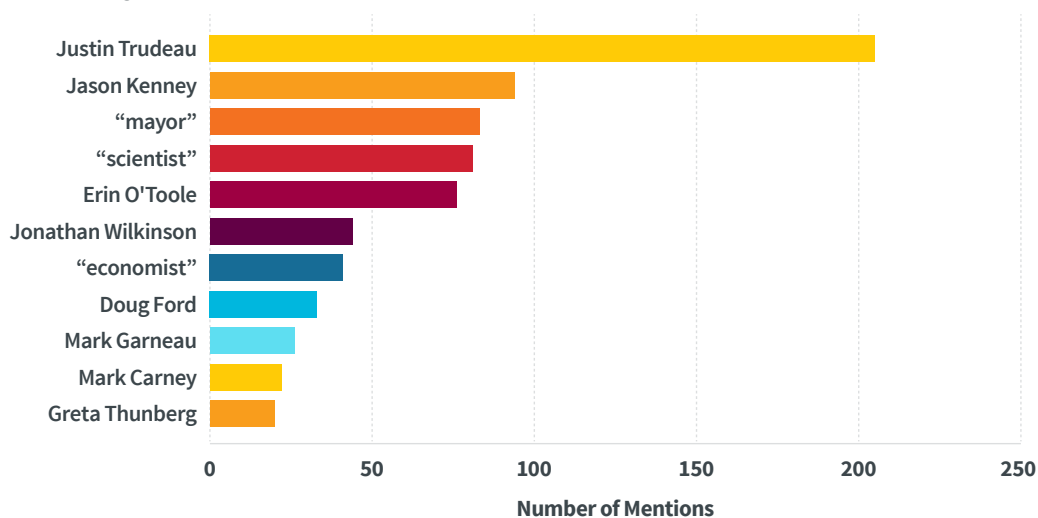


FIGURE 8. Most frequent appearances in climate change stories in national media, Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021. (American politicians have been omitted.)

SAMPLE NARRATIVES

“The leadership on climate change that the U.S. is bringing into place and that we already have.”

- Justin Trudeau - [*Financial Post*](#)

“These investments will support major public transit projects like subway extensions, help electrify fleets with zero-emission vehicles.”

- Justin Trudeau - [*National Post*](#)

Premier Jason Kenney said a robust investment in CCUS technologies are necessary for Canada to reach the federal government’s [climate] target.

- [*CBC*](#)

Kenney said the death of Line 5 would be “devastating” for Canada ... that anyone who wants to cut off Alberta’s oil and gas exports would have to be “brain dead.”

- [*CBC*](#)

Conservative party members vote down resolution to recognize reality of climate change... The vote will be a blow to leader Erin O’Toole.

- [*National Post*](#)

“Help a struggling energy sector and secure better prices for our resources.”

- Erin O’Toole - [*National Post*](#)



Indigenous representation

Twenty per cent of renewable energy stories mention Indigenous issues or spokespeople, with slightly less (17%) representation when stories are about pipelines or the broader oil and gas industry. Within overall climate coverage, the figure falls to 14%. Note that this is essentially the same proportion that reference Justin Trudeau.

Based on our sampling, Indigenous voices are predominantly presented (70 per cent of the time) by the media as favouring energy transition and environmental protection.

INDIGENOUS VOICE IN NATIONAL MEDIA

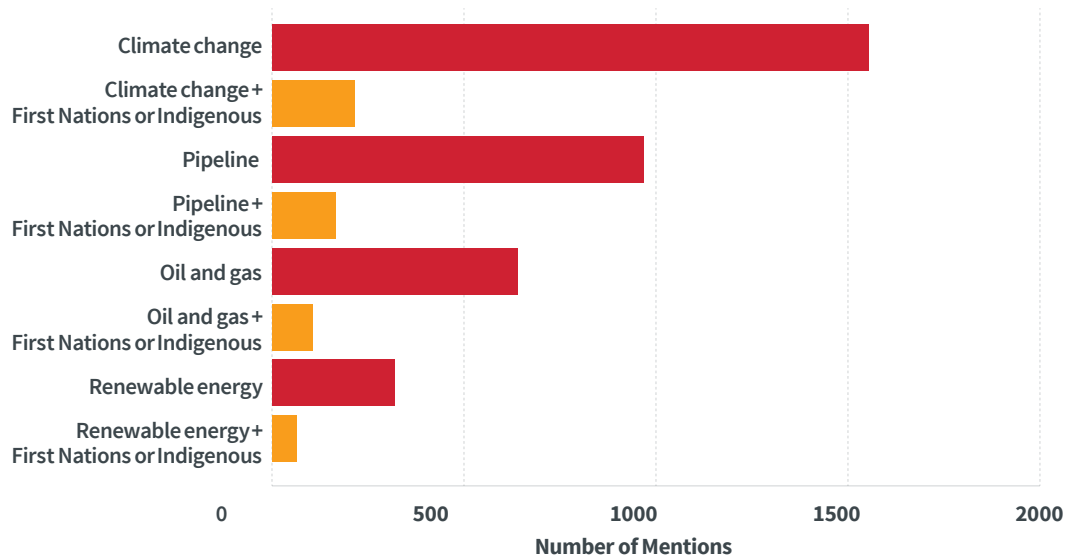


FIGURE 9. Mentions of “Indigenous” or “First Nation/s” in climate and energy coverage, Jan 1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

SAMPLE NARRATIVES

Across the country, Indigenous communities are significantly involved in some 197 clean-energy projects that generate more than one megawatt of power, which, when the sources are operating at full capacity, is enough to power 1,200 homes.

– Globe and Mail

“Our message is simple. Like all other Indigenous peoples, we respect the environment. Yet, we need the resources to build better homes for our families, provide work and hope for young people, and strengthen resilience among our people. The environmentalists who come onto our lands and tell us what to do offer no jobs, no food and no path toward sustainability.”

– The Star

In Minnesota, more than 200 people have been arrested in recent months as Indigenous protests escalate against Enbridge’s \$10-billion upgrade of an existing stretch of the network, this one known as Line 3.

– CBC



SOLUTIONS IN THE NATIONAL MEDIA

Electric vehicles and renewable energy are the main topics covered as solutions in the national media. Media coverage of these topics generally doesn't mention climate change at all.

The concept of net-zero has quickly gained significant traction among elite media. Stories about hydrogen have also become prominent, far outpacing nature-based solutions or technologies like carbon capture.

There is very little coverage of green stimulus or climate-oriented recovery from COVID, even during the period leading up to the 2021 budget.

In terms of language, the term "renewable energy" is used significantly more often in the national media than "clean" or "green" energy.

SOLUTIONS MENTIONED IN NATIONAL MEDIA

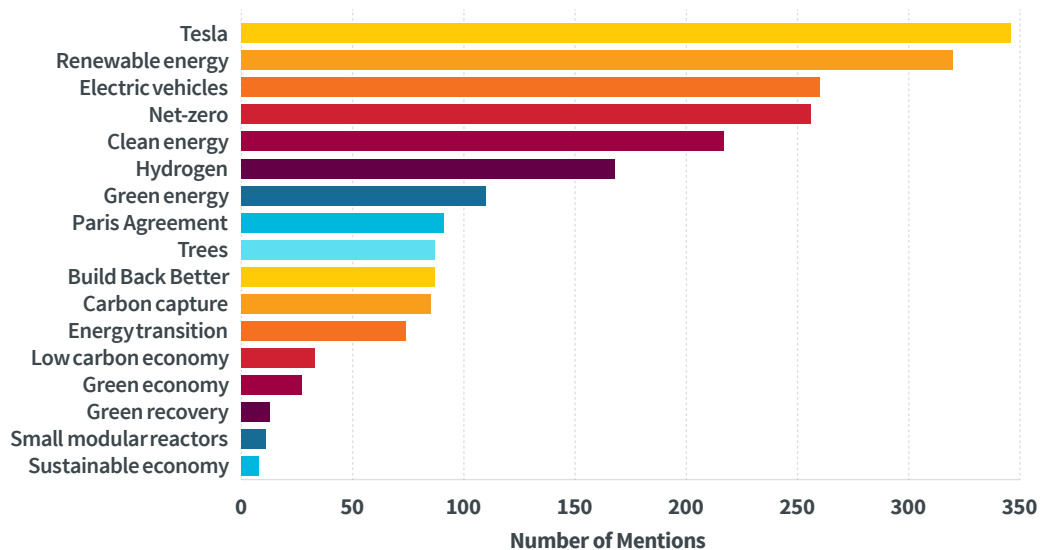


FIGURE 10. Most commonly mentioned climate solutions in national media, Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

Climate change and solutions narratives are largely divorced from each other. Climate change or greenhouse gas emissions are referenced in less than half of stories about renewables and less than one-quarter of stories about EVs. Although Tesla is mentioned more frequently than either renewables or electric vehicles generally, only 7% of stories about Tesla mention climate change.

On the one hand, solutions may be more appealing to some audiences if they're not presented as climate action. On the other hand, the lack of climate context means that deployment of solutions may register as not being urgent and media coverage may not enhance the public's understanding of transition pathways.

SOLUTIONS WITHOUT A PROBLEM

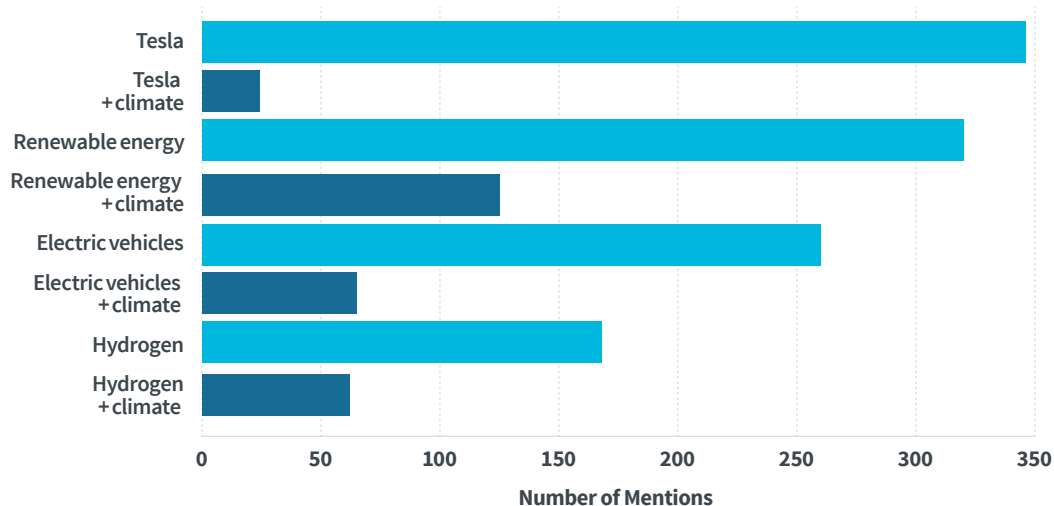


FIGURE 11. National media mentions of climate solutions with and without mention of climate change, Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

SAMPLE NARRATIVES

The new Bolt is part of GM's pledge to bring 30 new EVs to market worldwide by 2035, and its goal of producing only electric passenger vehicles in 14 years.

- *The Star*

Car manufacturers such as General Motors, Ford and Volkswagen have significantly sped up their plans to create all-electric vehicles and decarbonize their operations.

- *CBC*

Renewed energy is supercharging the lithium mining industry in Manitoba.

- *The Star*

EV rollout will require huge investments in strained... power grids.

- *Financial Post*

ENERGY TRANSITION & FOSSIL FUELS

The energy transition is widely accepted by the media and generally framed as an inevitability. However the national media conversation about fossil production has multiple, often conflicting narratives. In general coverage, the oil and gas industry is frequently presented as struggling although business coverage commonly describes stronger demand and profits going forward.

There are divergent narratives about future global demand for oil and gas and the consequences for Canadian oil and gas companies. We are now seeing the media discuss investors' concerns over climate and GHGs (Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance) in coverage of investment for fossil fuel production – this issue currently appears in about one-quarter of stories about investment in the oil and gas sector.

The national media frequently conflates having an oil and gas industry with expanding that industry. Discussion of challenges facing the industry are common but narratives about winding down fossil production are rare.

What does “transition” mean?

Although an international energy transition is widely accepted to be underway and inevitable, in the context of fossil fuel production, it is often presented as a long-term process that doesn't require immediate or large-scale action.

Transition narratives within the fossil fuel conversation frequently undermine urgency. It is common to find politicians and industry voices reassuring audiences that “there will be demand for oil for decades to come.”

SAMPLE NARRATIVES

“This is a transition. It's going to be a transition that happens over the course of decades, not days.”

– Federal Environment Minister [Jonathan Wilkinson](#)

Big changes are on the horizon if and when the transition gets underway... we'll need more copper and other metals to build the wind turbines, charging stations and solar panels to replace the existing infrastructure.

– [Financial Post](#)

The Liberal government will be “transitioning Canadians out of their jobs...”

– Conservative Party Leader [Erin O’Toole](#)

“The real threat is not the government limiting production... It’s the economy and the culture moving away from consuming oil and shrinking the market.”

– Academic quoted in [AP/The Star](#)

Leaders in the oil and gas industry aren’t shy about their optimism for the rest of the year... Yet, that hopefulness is clouded by competing priorities for the sector as it picks itself off the ground and tries to position itself for a world increasingly focused on mitigating the impacts of climate change.

– [CBC](#)

Industry has embraced transition narratives

The Canadian oil and gas industry is frequently presented as embattled or “struggling” due to a combination of reduced demand from the pandemic, oil prices, broader market forces, insufficient pipelines and market access and growing concerns about climate change and greenhouse gas emissions.

Meanwhile, oil and gas companies and industry advocates have embraced the transition narrative.

SAMPLE NARRATIVES

TC Energy Corp sees “tremendous opportunity in energy transition... As part of our contribution, TC Energy is investing in several renewable energy and GHG reduction projects.”

– [Financial Post](#)

“It’s not the oil and gas that is a concern, it’s the carbon emissions.”

– Sonya Savage, AB energy minister, [National Post](#)

The plan to lay the groundwork for economic growth is to promote even more oil and gas development... the province can do that while still taking meaningful action on climate change.

– [CBC](#)

“From a drilling perspective, getting to zero or near zero, or certainly the targets that they’ve talked about which are 40 and 50 per cent reductions, are achievable...”

– [Financial Post](#)



The fossil fuel industry in the national media

Climate change comes up regularly but is only present in a minority of stories about the oil and gas industry. This is not surprising since most coverage of the industry is narrow and business-related – focused on corporate news, commodity prices, profitability and operations. During the spring of 2021, climate came up in 34% of stories about the oilsands, 23% of stories about pipelines and 20% of stories about natural gas.

The national media is now including climate-related investment concerns in narratives about fossil fuel production, but only in a minority of coverage. Twenty-three per cent of stories about investment in the oil and gas sector mention concerns about climate change.

FOSSIL FUELS AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN NATIONAL MEDIA

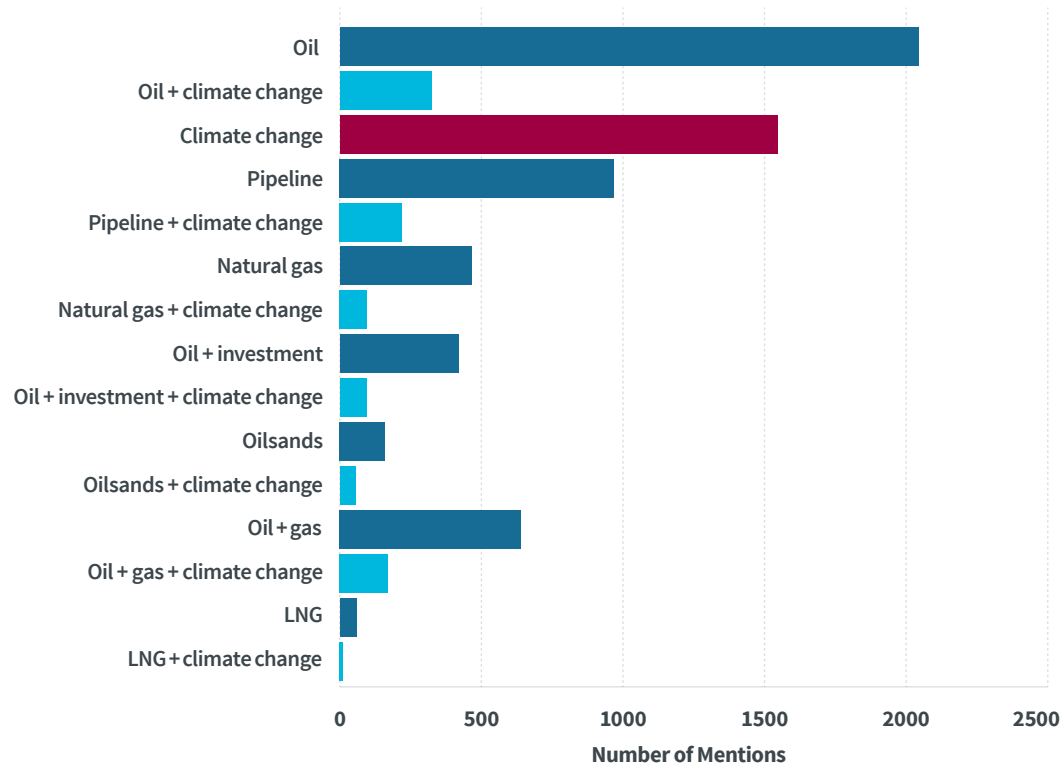


FIGURE 12. Stories mentioning the fossil fuel industry compared to the number of those stories which include mention of climate change. Jan.1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

KEEPING UP WITH THE AMERICANS

In the Spring of 2021, there was a very significant amount of climate coverage about the United States in Canadian media. John Kerry was as likely to figure in climate stories as Jonathan Wilkinson. During the research period, Joe Biden was much more commonly referenced than Justin Trudeau. Note that the time period reviewed in this report captured the inauguration and the priority placed on climate action by the Biden administration.

AN AMERICAN CONVERSATION

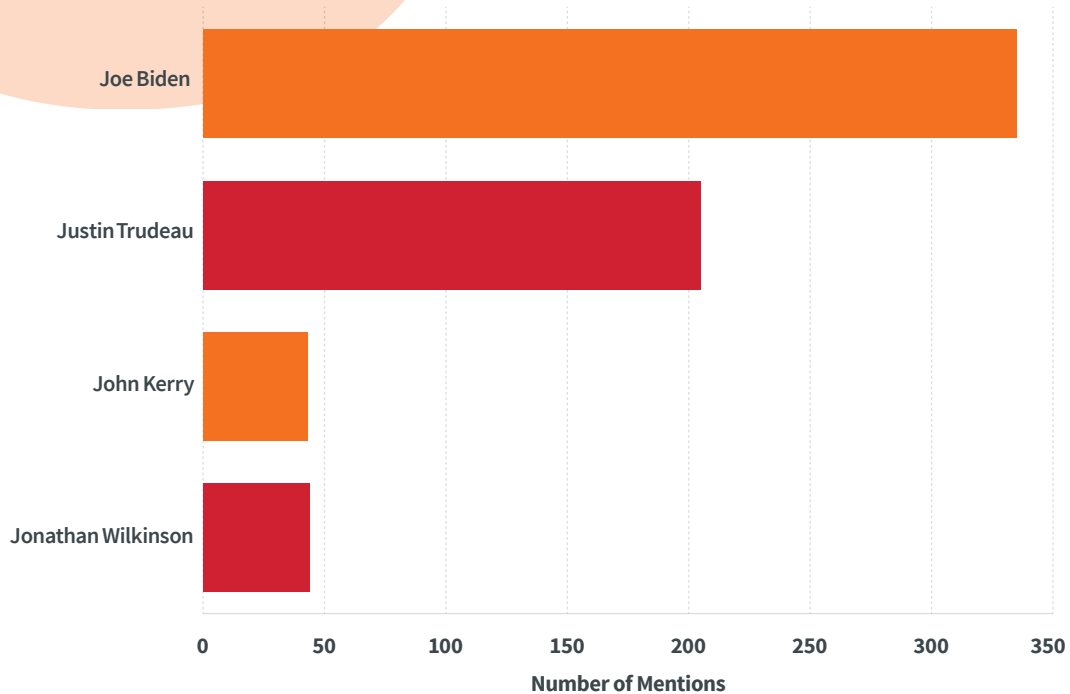


FIGURE 13. Climate change-related stories in Canadian national media mentioning John Kerry vs Jonathan Wilkinson; Joe Biden vs Justin Trudeau, Jan. 1 - Mar. 24, 2021.

SAMPLE NARRATIVES:

Joe Biden's climate ambition will challenge Canada to do more.

- *Globe and Mail*

Climate will be woven... across all dimensions. That really creates an urgency for Canada not to fall behind.

- *The Star*

Joe Biden's new climate plans should jolt Ottawa.

- *Globe and Mail*



