



Silent Protest

U.S. Media Coverage of Demonstrations Surrounding U.N. Climate Talks Abroad

Acknowledgments

This report was written by David Arkush, managing director of Public Citizen's Climate Program.

About Public Citizen

Public Citizen is a national non-profit organization with more than 400,000 members and supporters. We represent consumer interests through lobbying, litigation, administrative advocacy, research, and public education on a broad range of issues including consumer rights in the marketplace, product safety, financial regulation, worker safety, safe and affordable health care, campaign finance reform and government ethics, fair trade, climate change, and corporate and government accountability.



Public Citizen's Climate Program
215 Pennsylvania Ave. S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20003
P: 202-546-4996
F: 202-547-7392

Introduction

Each year, parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meet for what is known as a “conference of the parties,” or COP. Typically, many thousands of activists descend on the conferences to urge stronger action to combat climate change. In some years, the numbers are smaller but no less notable. For example, during the 2012 conference in Doha, Qatar, roughly 800 climate activists marched in what was thought to be the first ever demonstration in the nation’s history.¹

From U.S. media coverage, one can scarcely discern that members of the public engage with the COPs at all. For this report, we examined coverage from 15 media outlets — nine major U.S. newspapers, ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News Network, and MSNBC — and found just one article squarely reporting on a demonstration during a COP. Eighty percent of coverage of demonstrations fell into three categories: pieces that mention demonstrations only in photo captions, ones reporting on the fact that demonstrations were canceled during the 2015 Paris COP, and reports of accusations against activists.

Demonstrations are one of the principal ways for members of the public to interact with officials and claim a voice in international negotiations. This is particularly true of people or groups who lack significant financial resources and lack access to government or corporate officials. Media coverage that ignores these voices stunts public debate and skews it toward the best connected and most empowered.

No less important in the climate space, media coverage that ignores popular voices distorts public perceptions, creating the impression that there is significantly less support for action than actually exists. These misperceptions in turn distort politics and policy. As a general matter, people are more likely to adopt beliefs or policies that they perceive as having broader public support.² The climate crisis may present a special case in which the need for accurate reporting of views is particularly acute. The issue presents major collective action problems, which are significantly more difficult to overcome when people’s views are systemically biased against the prospect of shared beliefs, coordination, and commitments to problem-solving.³ And there is clear evidence that public perceptions of beliefs about the climate crisis and support for solutions are depressed.⁴ When the media ignore major demonstrations in support of climate solutions, they put a thumb on the scale favoring inaction.

¹ John Vidal, *Doha Climate Conference Diary: Qatar’s First Environmental March*, THE GUARDIAN, Dec. 3, 2012, <http://pubc.it/2lFWe2S>.

² See generally Matto Mildemberger & Dustin Tingley, *Beliefs about Climate Beliefs: The Problem of Second-Order Climate Opinions in Climate Policymaking*, British J. of Pol. Sci. (forthcoming), <http://pubc.it/2lJEBiC>.

³ *Id.* at 3–6.

⁴ See, e.g., *id.*

This report does not examine the causes of the U.S. media's silence on demonstrations around COPs. The media arguably report little on the talks in general,⁵ a point that may bear on whether or how outlets cover the attendant activism. Regardless of the reasons, this report finds a stark absence of coverage of mass popular engagement with COPs. The public would be better served by significantly more and better coverage.

Analysis

For this report, we examined coverage of demonstrations or other activism around the COPs from 2010 to 2016 in nine major U.S. newspapers, the three major broadcast networks, and three major cable news channels.⁶ Over the six-year period, these outlets ran just 30 news pieces that devoted at least one sentence to activism surrounding a COP.⁷ The most significant findings are as follows:

- Just one article was squarely devoted to covering a demonstration: a *Chicago Tribune* piece that reported on a gathering of roughly 100 people in downtown Chicago during the 2015 Paris COP.
- Seven of the 15 outlets did not report at all on demonstrations around a COP: *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Post*, *USA Today*, ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox News Network.
- Ten of the mentions of demonstrations or other activism, or 33 percent, appeared only in photo captions accompanying articles which did not discuss those subjects.
- Another eight pieces, or 27 percent, concerned the fact that demonstrations were barred during the 2015 Paris COP because the conference followed closely after a major terrorist attack there. When one excludes photo captions, these pieces on protests not happening comprise 40 percent of all the reporting on COP-related demonstrations.
- Six pieces covered allegations by the Peruvian government that Greenpeace activists damaged a world heritage site while demonstrating during the 2014 COP in Lima. When one excludes photo captions, these pieces represent 30 percent of the total reporting.

⁵ See, e.g., Christopher F. Schuetze, *Ignoring Planetary Peril, a Profound 'Disconnect' Between Science and Doha*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 9, 2012 ("The American news media reported little on the climate talks, compared with Europe.").

⁶ The outlets are *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Denver Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News Network, and MSNBC. We searched these outlets in LexisNexis, from 2010 to 2016, using the following terms: ("United Nations" PRE/10 conference) OR ("United Nations" PRE/10 summit) OR ("United Nations" PRE/10 talks) AND ("climate change" OR "global warming") AND (demonstrat! OR protest OR crowd OR activis!). We excluded articles that mentioned demonstrations or activists only in a serial list or dependent clause. We included articles that spent at least one sentence on them.

⁷ A notable difference was when the United Nations held a special summit on climate change in New York City in September 2014. Two days beforehand, more than 300,000 climate activists marched in New York City alone. Activism around this stateside summit garnered over 40 pieces in the media outlets examined, exceeding the coverage of six years' worth of activism surrounding official conferences of the parties to the UNFCCC held abroad.

- *The New York Times* ran the most articles mentioning demonstrations (six). But three of its articles were on the Peruvian government's allegations against Greenpeace. Two of three total pieces from *The Wall Street Journal* focused on the Peru controversy, as did one of four from CNN.

The following are brief notes regarding all of the pieces from each media outlet, listed in alphabetical order by outlet:

The Chicago Tribune

- One story on a demonstration in Chicago during the 2015 Paris COP.⁸
- One article on security measures for the Paris COP and the barring of demonstrations (a version of this article was also published in *The Los Angeles Times*).⁹
- Two photo captions.

CNN

- One piece on the Peru-Greenpeace controversy.¹⁰
- Three pieces that briefly mention demonstrations to note that they were barred before the 2015 Paris COP.¹¹

The Denver Post

- One brief note that more than 200 protesters were detained after a demonstration during the 2015 Paris COP.¹²

The Los Angeles Times

- One piece on how the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks would affect security at the COP.¹³

Table 1: Outlets by Pieces or Photo Captions Mentioning Demonstrations

Outlet	Mentions
New York Times	7
Los Angeles Times	6
Wall Street Journal	6
Chicago Tribune	4
CNN	4
MSNBC	1
Denver Post	1
Washington Post	1
Boston Globe	0
New York Post	0
USA Today	0
ABC	0
CBS	0
Fox News Network	0
NBC	0

⁸ Patrick M. O'Connell, *Climate Change Demonstrators Hold Rally, March in Loop*, CHICAGO TRIB., Nov. 30, 2015.

⁹ Alexandra Zavis, *Paris Heats up Before Talks; City Remains on Edge as 150 World Leaders Visit for Climate Change Event*, CHICAGO TRIB., Nov. 30, 2015.

¹⁰ Katia Hetter, *Peru Claims Greenpeace Damaged Ancient Nazca Lines*, CNN.com, Dec. 12, 2012.

¹¹ *President Obama Leaving Today for Paris Summit; Turkey to Return Pilot's Body to Russia*, CNN, Nov. 29, 2015; Kevin Liptak, *Obama Seeks to Seal Climate Legacy in Terror-Addled Paris*, CNN.com, Nov. 29, 2015; *Countries Meet for International Climate Change Conference; U.S. Policy for Syria Examined; Interview with White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest*, CNN, Nov. 30, 2015.

¹² *Police Detain Hundreds in Paris Clash*, DENVER POST, Nov. 30, 2015.

¹³ Henry Chu, *The World; Massive Security Task; World Leaders and Activists Will Swarm Paris for Climate Summit*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 30, 2015.

- One piece on security measures for the Paris COP and the barring of demonstrations (a version of the article was also published in *The Chicago Tribune*).¹⁴
- Four photo captions.

MSNBC

- One Associated Press piece on criticism of Qatar as the host of the 2012 COP.¹⁵

The New York Times

- Three articles on the Peru-Greenpeace controversy.¹⁶
- One piece discussing widespread dissatisfaction with the 2012 COP, quoting multiple environmentalists, and noting that a group of activists unfurled a banner inside the negotiations and were immediately removed, as well as deported from Qatar.¹⁷
- One 2016 piece on protests of museums, which discusses a protest at the Louvre during the 2015 Paris COP as its lead-in.¹⁸
- One photo caption.

The Wall Street Journal

- One piece on environmental groups walking out of the 2013 COP in protest.¹⁹
- One piece on the Peru-Greenpeace controversy.²⁰
- Three photo captions.

Table 2: Outlets by Pieces That Mention Demonstrations in Main Text

Outlet	Mentions
New York Times	6
CNN	4
Wall Street Journal	3
Los Angeles Times	2
Chicago Tribune	2
MSNBC	1
Denver Post	1
Washington Post	1
Boston Globe	0
New York Post	0
USA Today	0
ABC	0
CBS	0
Fox News Network	0
NBC	0

¹⁴ Alexandra Zavis, *French Security out in Force for Climate Summit; About 150 World Leaders Are Expected — Just Over Two Weeks After Terrorist Attacks*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 30, 2015.

¹⁵ Michael Casey (Associated Press), *Qatar Set to Host Major Climate Talks*, MSNBC.com, Nov. 22, 2012.

¹⁶ William Neuman, *Peru Is Indignant After Greenpeace Makes Its Mark on Ancient Site*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 13, 2014; William Neuman, *Peru Plans to Charge Greenpeace Activists for Damage to Nazca Lines*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 14, 2014; William Neuman & Andrea Zarate, *Greenpeace Won't Name Activists, Peru Says*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 16, 2014.

¹⁷ Christopher F. Schuetze, *Ignoring Planetary Peril, a Profound 'Disconnect' Between Science and Doha*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 9, 2012.

¹⁸ Holland Cotter, *Making Museums Moral Again*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 17, 2016.

¹⁹ Patryk Wasilewski, *Environmental Groups Walk Out of Climate Conference; Activists Criticize Poland for Promoting Coal as Energy Source*, WALL ST. J., Nov. 21, 2013.

²⁰ Robert Kozak, *Peru Says Nazca Lines Damaged by Greenpeace Protest; Environmental Group Denies Monday's Protest Caused Any Damage*, WALL ST. J., Dec. 10, 2014.

The Washington Post

- One article discussing security measures and the cancellation of demonstrations for the 2015 Paris COP.²¹

Conclusion

This analysis finds that major U.S. media rarely cover some of the most significant international climate demonstrations or the solidarity actions that accompany them in the U.S. When the media cover these actions at all, they are principally used as artwork for stories on other COP-related subjects. The media also cover demonstrations when they are barred from taking place, as well as report on activists who are accused of wrongdoing.

The dearth of coverage of major demonstrations around the COPs is a disservice to the public. It likely depresses public perceptions of concern over the climate crisis and support for solutions, in turn heightening the barriers to responding to the crisis.

²¹ Frances Stead Sellers & Griff Witte, *Amid Grief, Preparing for a Climate Summit*, WASH. POST, Nov. 29, 2015.