

Climate Solutions and Climate Attribution in Extreme Heat Press Coverage: The July 2022 UK Heat Waves

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Heat waves have devastating impacts. Media coverage is key to helping audiences make the link to climate change. We use a historic July 2022 heat wave in the United Kingdom (UK) as a case study of press reporting on climate solutions and climate attribution during an extreme weather event. Between June 16 and August 25, 2022, the UK was hit by successive episodes of extreme heat. The heat prompted the first ever Level 4 Heat-Health Alert (HHA) and Red National Severe Weather Warning Service Extreme Heat warnings to be issued. When temperatures exceeded 40°C for [the first time](#) in the UK on July 19 of that year, it was a wake-up call. How often journalists make the connection to the underlying issue of climate change, without which the heat wave would have been much more unlikely [according to](#) a World Weather Attribution study, in reporting on heat waves like these remains an understudied topic.

In [our study](#), published in the peer-reviewed journal *Environmental Communication*, we investigated how newsrooms cover extreme heat disasters and the extent to which they make a direct connection to climate change. We used content analysis methods to study reporting on climate solutions and climate attribution in English-language press coverage of the heatwave by UK national and local news outlets, compared to leading U.S. news outlets. Our research shows that climate attribution and mentions of climate solutions were largely missing in news reporting.

The study is [available open access](#) and freely available to download from the publisher's website.

Key finding: Newsrooms need to do better at connecting extreme heat to climate change

We found that whether or not news stories mentioned climate change in heatwave coverage, let alone attributed the severity of the heatwave to climate change, varied significantly across news organizations included in our sample. Local newsrooms in places with the highest temperatures during the heat wave did a poor job of connecting the extreme heat to climate change. Most national press coverage also failed to highlight this connection. Climate journalists, independent of newsroom-level effects, were more likely to attribute the extreme heat to climate change.

The UK broadsheet news outlet *The Guardian* [has long been](#) exemplary at climate coverage. This leadership among the British press showed in our sample. Of articles published by *The Guardian* in our dataset, 53% mentioned climate change and 47% made an explicit link between the extreme heat and climatic change, compared to 21% and 14% of articles, respectively, across the rest of our UK newspaper sample. *The New York Times* was the news outlet that included the

highest relative frequency of attributing heatwaves to climate change, with 71% of articles published by that newsroom making the climate connection. Both *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* are classified as climate-specialist news outlets in our dataset. In contrast, among the local UK press outlets in our sample, the *Grimsby Telegraph* included no items that made the climate connection and only one mention of climate change in a quotation from a Met Office meteorologist. *The Nottingham Post* published three articles mentioning climate change (17%), with attribution in two of these. London-based *The Evening Standard* did better with 39% of its articles mentioning climate change, with attribution in the majority of these.

Key finding: Little discussion of climate solutions in extreme heat coverage

Our results showed limited discussions of longer-term solutions, particularly in local news sources. In other words, we found a disconnect between [climate solutions reporting](#) alongside discussion of causes and impacts. Regardless of the beat of the reporters covering the UK heat wave, articles appearing in climate-specialist news outlets were more likely to discuss climate solutions than those in non-specialist ones. In our dataset, non-specialist news outlets were all of the local publications (the *Grimsby Telegraph*, *The Evening Standard* and the *Nottingham Post*) and the national tabloid the *Daily Mail*, as well as *The Times*.

A very limited range of climate solutions got mentioned in the UK heat wave coverage. The most frequently discussed topic that we coded as a solution was climate politics and policy discussion (23% of articles), followed by air conditioning (18% of articles, mainly in U.S. publications), infrastructure adaptations like mitigating the heat island effect through better urban planning (11%) and retrofitting homes through energy efficiency measures like passive design and installing heat pumps (6%).

Conclusion

This research provides a benchmark for understanding of what article attributes and media enterprise-level factors contribute to climate change issue attention and mentions of solutions in extreme heat reporting. A novel aspect of our study was that we started with a sample of heat wave articles, rather than with climate change keywords. This enabled us to compare articles mentioning climate change to those that did not within a corpus of heat wave articles. We were able to model which factors contribute to climate change issue attention, as well as the frequency of climate solutions mentions. Our research reveals significant shortcomings in how mainstream news media report about the here and now of the consequences of the climate crisis. General interest reporters still often lack the training in climate science basics to help audiences connect the dots to climate change and on reporting about climate solutions.