

Planet Earth on the Eve of the Copenhagen Climate Conference 2009: A Study of Prestige Newspapers from Different Continents

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Abstract

The problem of the changing climate in the broader ecological context is one of the main subjects of the global debate, because it concerns the whole planet and all the people inhabiting different continents. Before the United Nations' international climate conference (COP15), taking place in December 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark, prestige newspapers from different continents and countries published editorials, reports or at least news about the climate problem and expectations towards the conference. 56 dailies from all the continents published a joint alarming editorial that underlined the urgent problem of the global warming and the need to battle it "for the humanity's sake". The majority of those 56 dailies are leftist ones, while other dailies published another important editorials or reports. In this study, different conservative and liberal newspapers from Europe are analyzed, as well as another ones from other continents. Although the European (and then the Northern American) press dedicated relatively most space to the problem, in other continents the prestige newspapers published some texts concerning the climate change too. The results show also that not only leftist newspapers treat the climate problem seriously. There is rather a kind of global pluralism in looking for the ways to battle the climate change, but not in the sense to do it.

Keywords: Earth; climate change; COP15; newspapers; global debate

INTRODUCTION

Copenhagen became an unofficial world capital in December 2009, when the United Nations' Climate Change Conference (COP15) took place in the biggest Danish city, invaded by important persons and groups from different continents, including heads of state, ministers, scientists, journalists, activists and so on. Although the conference did not change yet the climate (even despite of such presumptions taking into consideration the strong winter in Europe following the Copenhagen Summit) and ended without general agreement, an accord was signed. Journalistic Web Editor of the Copenhagen Climate Council, Justin Gerdes, stated: "Most importantly, the Copenhagen Accord signaled that a concerted global effort to address climate change is possible" (Gerdes 2009, article published on the website of the Copenhagen Climate Council, www.copenhagenclimatcouncil.com). Yes, it is possible, but it would be impossible without participation of the media that create debates and are responsible for the agenda setting (McCombs 2004, 2008). Anders Hansen underlines also the meaning of pictures or images in the

communication processes concerning environmental issues that become important thanks to the media, above all:

"While the roles of formal education in acquainting us with the public word and image vocabulary of the environment should not be overlooked, much, maybe most, of what we learn and know about 'the environment', we know from the media, broadly defined. Indeed, this applies not only to our beliefs and knowledge about those aspects of the environment, which are regarded as problems or issues for public and political concern, but extends much deeper to the ways in which we, as individuals, citizens, cultures and societies view, perceive and value nature and the natural environment" (Hansen 2010: 3).

Nevertheless, the media began to show the environmental problems only since the middle of the 20th century, when John B. Oakes wrote to "The New York Times" articles about this issue, though the Rachel Carson's book "The Silent Spring" is considered the first loud voice that focused attention of the activists on the contamination as a global danger. Today there are many journalists in the world specialized in the environmental journalism that began to develop dynamically since the Rio de Janeiro international summit in 1992 (Parratt 2006: 13). Nowadays, every international summit concerning environmental issues attracts the media's attention in accordance to the simple journalistic rule: bigger summit, bigger attention. The Copenhagen summit in 2009 was interesting for the media too, of course, because of the truly global range, the list of representatives, and because of the climate change problem present on the contemporary agenda. Anabela Carvalho explains:

"A series of remarkable events has contributed to transform climate change into one of the most high profile issues of the present moment: hurricane Katrina, Al Gore's film and book *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Nobel Prize that was awarded jointly to him and to the IPCC, the *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change*, Live Earth, and the gloomy forecasts of the 4th IPCC Assessment Report all concurred to putting climate change on the media, the public's and the political agendas, which then tend to feed each other. In fact, multiple surveys indicate that people around the world are aware of the issue and very concerned, are willing to act upon it and expect politicians to take the lead" (Carvalho 2008: 8).

This effect stems from the plurality of voices in the environmental communication and, above all, the convincing voices of the renowned authors, like Rachel Carson or Al Gore, whose books and activities, among others factors, made public the ecological problems. Robert Cox (2010) wrote that "[t]he landscape of environmental politics and public affairs can be as diverse, serious, controversial, colorful, and complex as an Amazonian rain forest or the Galapagos Islands' ecology", and he enumerated seven major voices of the "green" public sphere: 1) citizens and community groups, 2) environmental groups, 3) scientists and scientific discourse, 4) corporations and business lobbyists, 5) anti-environmental groups, 6) media and environmental journalism, 7) public officials and regulators (Cox 2010: 29). Janet M. Cramer and Karen A.

Foss (2009), however, underlined the important and complex roles of the voice of the notable persons. In the conclusion of their essay they stated:

"As a renowned author and former presidential candidate, respectively, [Rachel] Carson and [Al] Gore stand apart from the facts upon which they rely. Their credibility both separates them from and enhances their relationship to those facts. They know enough to presume the right to speak; they also know their ultimate success will depend on audience reception. With this stance, they suggest the need for humans to take a new and similar position in regard to the earth – no longer above it nor subservient to it but equal agents working in collaboration with it. Similarly, both play the role of seducer – flirting with facts, images, narratives, and figures of speech – to get the full attention of audiences in playful yet all-consuming ways. And they are also sorcerers, bringing to bear the magic of words – their juxtapositions, ironies, oppositions, and synchronicities – to create a new worldview" (Cramer & Foss 2009: 313).

Although the surveys show the general interest in the climate change issue, and the effect of the creating a new worldview is undoubted, it is important also to take into consideration the fact that the awareness of the people in different regions of the world meaningfully differ. The condition of the journalists' work differ also, depending on the level of freedom of expression, on the one hand, and on the pressure of business, on the second hand. In the reports of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Article 19, published in 2009, one can read about journalists who are silenced while trying to treat the climate change problems, or about journalists censored, imprisoned, assaulted and sometimes killed because of covering e.g. the polluting of rivers. The Article 19's report, "Changing the Climate for Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Information", shows the climate change debate has not incorporated freedom of expression and this can be seen in regional responses to climate change (IFEX, *Environmental journalists censored and assaulted*, 16 December 2009). Indeed, although the climate change is a truly global problem concerning the whole planet Earth, the responses must be given in the regional or rather local context. And the media considered opinion leaders in different countries are responsible for the images and meanings of the environmental problems. There are rather shortage of truly global mass media able to guide people from around the world. CNN is not in this case, BBC can offer a series of films "Planet Earth" with David Attenborough, and "National Geographic" can offer special editions in different countries, like e.g. "2008. El Estado del Planeta" in Spain or "Puls Ziemi. Jaka jest kondycja naszej planety" in 2009 in Poland, but the most important media in respective countries still have more possibilities to make people aware of the global climate problem.

Anabela Carvalho, in the Introduction to the book "Communicating Climate Change: Discourses, Mediations and Perceptions", frames some important questions for answers: "What are the meanings associated with climate change in different parts of the world and how have those meanings been produced, reproduced and transformed? How have the media in different countries been representing this issue? (...)" (Carvalho

2008: 8). In this study I try to answer, at least partially, these and some other questions, taking into consideration differences among continents and countries.

Before the climate conference in Copenhagen many prestige newspapers from different continents and countries published editorials, reports or at least news about the climate problem and expectations towards the conference. It seems to be relevant and interesting the question: whether the texts published on the day of the opening of the Copenhagen conference (or shortly before) in different prestige newspapers from different continents and countries were similar or rather different: did they present more global or 'glocal' views? Did they use rather ideological, emotional or reasonable argumentation? Did they treat the problem seriously or underestimating it? Did they suggest to take action by citizens or, above all, by the world leaders? And the main question is: does exist –10 years after the beginning of the new millennium, in the era of the global communication– a very global debate about the very global problem of the planet Earth?

METHODOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

In order to answer these questions I needed to select prestige newspapers from different continents and countries, representing different political (and economical) systems, development levels, cultures and languages. I decided to select 20 daily newspapers, though in the process of selection I needed to change the list of the analyzed papers. As noted above, the analysis was realized on the day (or shortly before in some cases) of the opening of the Copenhagen conference, so on December 7, 2009. On that day the Swiss newspaper "Le Temps" published an article titled "L'histoire prend date" ("The history takes a date"), informing about a joint initiative of 56 newspapers from 45 countries to "speak with the same voice by the same and joint editorial". The newspaper explained: "Nous le faisons car l'humanité est confrontée à une urgence extrême" ("We do it, because the humanity is confronting with an extreme urgency"), and added a list of papers that took part in this joint initiative. Among different newspapers from different continents (and only two: "Miami Herald" and its Spanish-language edition "El Nuevo Herald" from the USA), also newspapers from Europe appeared. Majority of them, however, are considered leftist or at least closer to the leftist part of the political scene in given countries: "The Guardian" from Great Britain, "Le Monde" and "Libération" from France, "Süddeutsche Zeitung" from Germany, "Der Standard" from Austria, "Gazeta Wyborcza" from Poland, "Público" from Portugal... In the case of Italy and Spain, the main leftist newspapers ("La Repubblica" and "El País") as well as more center-rightist ones ("Corriere della Sera" and "El Mundo") signed the appeal. The most conservative or liberal papers, like "La Stampa" or "Il Giornale" from Italy and "ABC" from Spain, however, did not appear on the list ("Le Temps", December 7, 2009).

Taking into consideration this joint editorial of 56 newspapers from around the world, I decided to focus my attention on the papers that did not appear on the list published in "Le Temps". Since the group of 56 papers (let me name it G-56) took part in the global debate, it is relevant and interesting whether other important voices exist in the world among prestige press. G-56, dominated by the leftist newspapers, expressed clearly concern about the state of the Earth, the climate change, and appealed to the political leaders going to Copenhagen for action to take measures needed to limit the global warming. It is not a secret that the most famous propagator of the knowledge about the global warming is Al Gore, ex-vice-president of the USA from the Democratic Party, considered as leftist one (in the American political context). It is not a secret also that Barack Obama is more pro-ecological than his predecessor, George W. Bush. The USA was shown as a country responsible for most greenhouse gas pollution in the famous Al Gore's film and book "An Inconvenient Truth" (Gore 2006: 250-253) that appeared during the Republican president George W. Bush's rules, of course. On the cover of another important book, "Plan B 3.0. Mobilizing to Save Civilization", written by Lester R. Brown (president of Earth Policy Institute) a quotation of ex-president from Democratic Party, Bill Clinton, appeared: "We should all heed Brown's advice" with the wind energy symbolical images in the background (Brown 2008). Not only in the United States the environmentalist ideology is closer to the leftist part of the political scene – also in Europe the beginnings of the ecological movement are related to the 1968 revolutionary ideology (Parratt 2006: 12).

Taking into consideration these ideological aspects, and the joint editorial of the G-56, I have decided to analyze several conservative and liberal newspapers from Europe ("The Daily Telegraph" from Great Britain, "Le Figaro" from France, "ABC" from Spain, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" from Germany, "La Libre Belgique" from Belgium, "La Stampa" from Italy, and "Polska" from Poland), as well as different newspapers –that did not appear in the G-56 list– from other continents ("The New York Times" from the USA, "The Globe and Mail" from Canada, "The Australian" from Australia, "Folha de São Paulo" from Brazil, "La Nación" from Argentina, "El Universal" from Mexico, "La República" from Peru, "Le Messenger" from Cameroon, "Hindustan Times" from India, "Tehran Times" from Iran, "China Daily" from China and "Arab News" from Saudi Arabia). Such a selection of newspapers should be representative to answer the questions of this study with the main question being: does exist a very global debate about the very global problem of the planet Earth?

ANALYSIS OF THE EUROPEAN PRESS

In the weekend just before the Copenhagen conference the most conservative prestige paper from Great Britain, "The Daily Telegraph", published an "Telegraph View" titled: "Copenhagen climate summit: A time

for ingenuity and political leadership". In the first lines of the text one could read: "(...) What should be a scientific debate has descended almost into a theological dispute." The last paragraph of the text is, however, most persuasive:

"This is also a time for human ingenuity. Digging coal and drilling for oil and gas is the easy bit; developing new, low-carbon technologies means unleashing precisely the innovative expertise and entrepreneurial spirit that climate-change skeptics believe are often derided by the more zealous and anti-capitalist elements of the green lobby. We need to hear less rhetoric about the end of the world, or wearisome countdowns of the number of days we have left to save the planet (which will survive even if we are not on it) and far more about the positive future that we can create for ourselves, both in trying to avert climate change and in dealing with it. So this summit must be more than just a pointless talking shop that leaves behind nothing save its own gigantic carbon footprint. We must also remember this: Copenhagen is not the end of the process, but just the start" (Telegraph View, December 4, 2009).

"The Daily Telegraph" presented a pragmatic view, not skeptical, but pro-entrepreneurial, based on the human's mind, responsible for the future of the humanity inhabiting the planet Earth. Other European conservative prestige paper, the German "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", invited two specialists (scientists from climate research institutes) to write an article, published the day before the summit. They underlined the climate change problems and the importance of the conference in the text titled: "Die Prüfung der Menschlichkeit", so "The test of humanity" (Latif, Schellnhuber, "FAZ", December 6, 2009).

The French conservative newspaper "Le Figaro" treated the opening of the Copenhagen conference as the news of the day. December 7, 2009, on the top of the first page a big title appeared: "Copenhague: état d'urgence pour la planète" ("Copenhagen: state of urgency for the planet") with a mosaic of three photos in the background: a green rain forest with rainbow, a polar bear and big chimneys with big terrible smokes. The text, announced on the first page of the paper, was alarming and mobilizing for the political leaders with the words of the French Minister of Ecology, Jean-Louis Borloo, who said that in Copenhagen "a new organization of the world starts" (Court, Nodé-Langlois, "Le Figaro", December 7, 2009). "Le Figaro" offered eight "special pages" dedicated to the climate problems, while other conservative daily newspaper, "La Libre Belgique", edited in Brussels, dedicated to this issue twice more: 16 "special pages". On the first page a suggestive big title appeared: "Copenhague, le 'Yalta' du climat" ("Copenhagen, the 'Yalta' of the climate"), underlining the relevance and significance of the climate summit ("La Libre Belgique", December 7, 2009).

The Spanish main conservative newspaper "ABC" published, on the day of the opening of the summit, an article titled "De la revolución industrial a la verde" ("From the industrial revolution to the green one"), also underlining the significance of the conference, the climate change problems and the main goals of the

world: to limit the rise in global temperatures to 2°C over the preindustrial level, to limit meaningfully the CO₂ emissions, to help financially to poorer countries, and to limit the deforestations (Acosta, "ABC", December 7, 2009). The Italian liberal newspaper "La Stampa" seemed to be more skeptical, publishing on the day of the opening of the Copenhagen conference a suggestive editorial titled: "Il complotto dei climatologi" ("The plot of climatologists"). Although this title could question the researches on the climate change, the article does not undermine the global problem, but rather show many interests beyond the debate. In the last paragraph "La Stampa", owned by the Fiat Group, underlined: "Essere più efficienti in un mondo che non ha risorse infinite, è sempre una vittoria" ("To be more efficient in a world without infinite resources, it is always a victory"). And the newspaper concluded that "the quality of our future is in the game, and who is opposing the Copenhagen, he has probably much more explicit interests to defend" (Editorial, "La Stampa", December 7, 2009).

In the Polish liberal-conservative newspaper "Polska", that collaborate with "The Times" from London, published on the first page (on the day of the opening of the Copenhagen summit) an article titled: "Wydamy miliardy euro na ekologię" ("We will spend billions of euro for the ecology"). Although the newspaper does not undermine the global problem of the climate change, it is underlined the local, financial point of view. This newspaper, however, is a national project of united regional papers, and its advertising slogan is the popular phrase lastly: "Think globally, act locally", very useful to the ecological problems and the purposes of the Copenhagen conference (Koziański, "Polska", December 7, 2009).

ANALYSIS OF THE PRESS FROM OTHER CONTINENTS

Two Belgian scientists, Astrid Dirikx and Dave Gelders, noticed that the content analysis of the communication on climate change in the US press have shown the emphasis on scientific uncertainty and a more neutral tone than in British or German press. This is a consequence of the traditional (in the US press) balanced reporting that in the case of the global warming coverage leads to a journalistic problem called 'balance as bias'. This bias was found in some previous studies that showed, for example, that the majority of the US prestige press give equal attention to two different views: that global warming is anthropogenic and that it is caused by natural fluctuations (Dirikx, Gelders 2008: 98-109). In the most prestigious American daily newspaper, "The New York Times", however, on the day of the opening of the Copenhagen summit, the famous columnist Paul Krugman demonstrated a clear vision, although trying also to show different points of views:

"(...) We'll hear cries that the whole notion of global warming is a hoax perpetrated by a vast scientific conspiracy (...) We'll also, however, hear cries that climate-change policies will destroy jobs and growth.

The truth, however, is that cutting greenhouse gas emissions is affordable as well as essential. Serious studies say that we can achieve sharp reductions in emissions with only a small impact on the economy's growth. And the depressed economy is no reason to wait – on the contrary, an agreement in Copenhagen would probably help the economy recover" (Krugman, "The New York Times, December 7, 2009).

This commentary was to battle even the general conflict between the ecology and the economic growth. This conflict did not exist also in Canada, at least in the opinion of "The Globe and Mail" that, shortly before the Copenhagen summit, published an article titled: "The changing climate and Canadian realities". The newspaper argued that "Canada can be a leader in conventional and clean energy both. That is the hallmark of an energy superpower" ("Globe and Mail", December 5, 2009). In the Brazilian newspaper "Folha de São Paulo" the first woman that received the Nobel Prize in Economy, Elinor Ostrom, was quoted. She demonstrated her preoccupation with the climate problem, and the article concluded with her words suggesting that "to stop a war is difficult, but to resolve a problem that is at the same time biological, chemical and human, it is a very much difficult task" (*Agir...*, "Folha de São Paulo", December 7, 2009). Other newspapers from Latin America also published reports about the climate change in the context of the Copenhagen conference, though there were, in general, fewer texts in the Latin American prestige papers than in the European and Northern American ones.

The Peruvian newspaper "La República" was not so optimistic like "The New York Times" or "The Globe and Mail", maybe because Peru is not the USA or Canada, in the economic sense. "La República" reminded that the USA and China, two countries responsible for 45 per cent of the global emissions annually, did not signed the Kyoto Protocol (in 1997) and they will not be interested –in the newspaper's opinion– in limiting the economic development (China) or "American way of life" (USA). And "La República" suggested that the international cooperation is the key factor to save the planet, while in the Amazonian Summit in Manaus (in November, shortly before Copenhagen) did not appear the most important heads of state from South America: Chávez, Uribe, García, Correa, Morales (*Copenhague...*, "La República", December 7, 2009). The prestige newspaper "La Nación" from Argentina quoted the pope Benedict XVI that had make an appeal to people to adopt more modest and responsible style of life and think about "the poor and the future generations". The paper informed also about an alternative NGOs forum in Copenhagen that was to be a testimony of the climate change victims in Bangladesh, Nigeria and Greenland (Corradini, "La Nación", December 7, 2009). The Mexican newspaper "El Universal" asked: "What could we expect of Copenhagen?" and "What Mexico could contribute to Copenhagen?". In conclusion, the author of the text, the Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources, Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada, stated that the climate change problem is "el más grande que la civilización moderna haya jamás enfrentado" ("the biggest one that the modern civilization ever has taken on") (Elvira Quesada, "El Universal", December 7, 2009).

When the Copenhagen summit began, in Australia was the December 8 already. "The Australian", owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, published on that day an article by Les Coleman, who is active in the climate change debate since the late 1980s. In his opinion, "international agreement is unnecessary given that just five nations –China, the US, Russia, India and Japan– contribute 60 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. If they act, emission slow; otherwise not". The keyword of the Coleman's article was, however, "sustainability", also in the local, Australian context: "The major contemporary challenge facing Australia is to make industry and urban infrastructure more sustainable" (Coleman, "The Australian", December 8, 2009). A newspaper from the biggest global polluter, "China Daily", published an editorial titled "Growth with greenery", which is a next alarming, but rather optimistic voice:

"The UN climate change conference opens in Copenhagen today, giving humankind a much-needed chance to define its growth model, as well as its future. (...) Though die-hard climate-change skeptics still refuse to recognize the threats posed by global warming, the Copenhagen summit itself is proof of the growing agreement among politicians, scientists, businessmen and ordinary people on its seriousness" ("China Daily", December 7, 2009).

Other daily from other big polluter, "Hindustan Times" from India, underlined the problem of growth too, but also the belief that "unlike an inflexible US, India has understood that while poverty is its prime preoccupation, it will not put off trying to implement emissions' reductions at this stage of industrialisation" (Panicker, "Hindustan Times", December 6, 2009). In the Iranian "Tehran Times" one could also find some critics towards the USA and the general rules of the world, where there are the rich and the poor: "What we have on the table instead at Copenhagen is a bastard version of the deal in which the rich countries buy the right to go on emitting large amounts of greenhouse gases by subsidizing clean power and other emissions reductions in the poor countries". This pessimistic text concluded with such words: "So the best outcome at Copenhagen would be a ringing declaration of principles, and an agreement to get back round the table and do the hard negotiations over the next 12-18 months. Since the U.S. Congress has still not mandated any reduction in American emissions and Canada will do its best to subvert the proceedings, that is also a quite likely outcome" (Dyer, "Tehran Times", December 7, 2009). On the same day, the Middle East's leading English-language daily, "Arab News" (Saudi Arabia), published an article by Connie Hedegaard, the Danish minister for the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. The text was clearly alarming and optimistic with such a conclusion: "We have no alternative. We must handle climate change and we must do it right now. Copenhagen is the deadline. Time is up. Let's get the job done" (Hedegaard, "Arab News", December 7, 2009).

The continent where the fewest articles about the climate change on the day of the opening of the Copenhagen summit appeared, was Africa, despite its natural richness. Several African dailies participated

in the so called (by me) G-56, but one could have impression that Africa is not very interested in the global warming problem. Nevertheless, some important articles were published, for example a text titled: "Changements climatiques: Une stratégie francophone pour Copenhague" ("Climatic changes: A francophone strategy for Copenhagen") that appeared in "Le Messenger" from Cameroon. The newspaper appealed for more active participation of the francophone countries from the South in negotiations concerning the climate change problems, but also reminded a "Nouveau pacte vert pour l'Afrique" ("New green pact for Africa") of the African Union that aims to enable Africa to defend against the consequences of the climate changes (Joannidis, "Le Messenger", December 7, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

Although the European (and then the Northern American) press dedicated relatively most space to the problem of the global warming just before the Copenhagen summit, in other continents (where the biosphere is, indeed, meaningfully richer) also different prestige newspapers published some texts concerning the climate change. The results of this study show also that not only the leftist newspapers (from the G-56 and others) treat the climate problem seriously, because the conservative and liberal papers demonstrate serious preoccupation with the ecology too. And different skeptical texts in some papers, suggesting for example a climatologists' plot or a nonsense of the international summits in the world dominated (and polluted) by only few powers, are only testimonies of the global pluralism, but they do not undermine the sense of the battle against the climate change. There is pluralism in looking for the ways to battle, but not in the sense to do it. Some newspapers appeal more to the ordinary people/citizens, others appeal to political leaders; some propose local solutions, others present more global views, and so on. Nevertheless, an alien coming from other planet, able to read press in different human languages, could have impression that the Copenhagen conference was the very crucial moment to the Earth, and that he/she should rather flee this planet destroyed, step by step, by the people.

Finally, it is necessary to underline that some shortcomings appeared in this study, taking into consideration a limited selection of newspapers and a lack of rigid methodology used to such a comparative analysis of newspapers from different continents and countries. Nevertheless, in my opinion, there is a strong need to develop comparative studies of this kind in order to understand better the differences among cultures, and to look for the answer to the main question that is: does exist a very global debate about the very global problem of the planet Earth?

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