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Shifting Perceptions on Net Zero: Growing Awareness, Polarized Views

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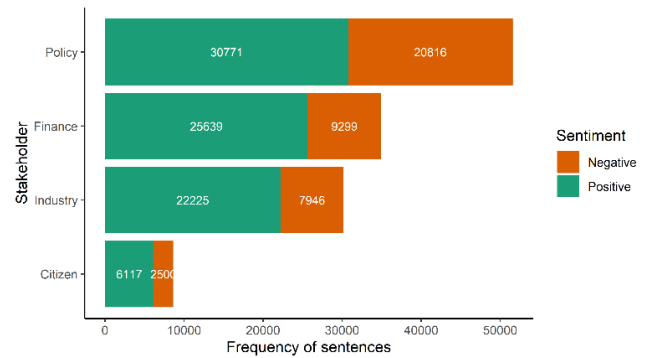
Key messages

- News media coverage on net zero and across key stakeholders is increasingly polarized
- Policy design should consider the interests of different stakeholders
- Tailored communications strategies can help build consensus
- Researchers and policymakers should engage with media outlets to promote balanced narratives

Importance: Net Zero Takes Center Stage

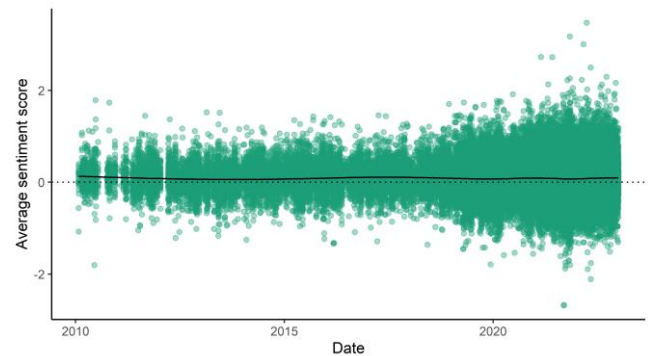
The global transition to net-zero requires political support. However, transformative action remains contested, and a lack of public and industry support remain key barriers to the implementation and effectiveness of climate policies. Therefore, understanding the factors that shape stakeholder perceptions is critical for overcoming potential obstacles to low-carbon transition and legitimizing policy interventions. While topics of net zero have entered mainstream discourse, there is limited research on how this discourse is framed in relation to various stakeholders.

This research broadly asks, how has media discourse on net zero evolved over time and across stakeholders? By analyzing 12,626 news articles from major media outlets around the world for common themes and sentiment, we find that although discourse on net zero has garnered increased media attention over time, diverging narratives suggest that net zero is becoming a more contentious issue with polarized views. These diverging narratives may be due to varied interests of key stakeholder groups, such as industry, government, civil society, and financial actors. The study also finds divergence in stakeholder preferences for technological versus policy-oriented solutions – and divergence in public opinion following high-profile international events.



Opportunities and barriers: News Media as a Catalyst for Change (or Confusion)

By understanding the shifting sentiment towards net zero ambitions and the nuances that may exist across different stakeholder groups, a key opportunity lies in leveraging news media to create public



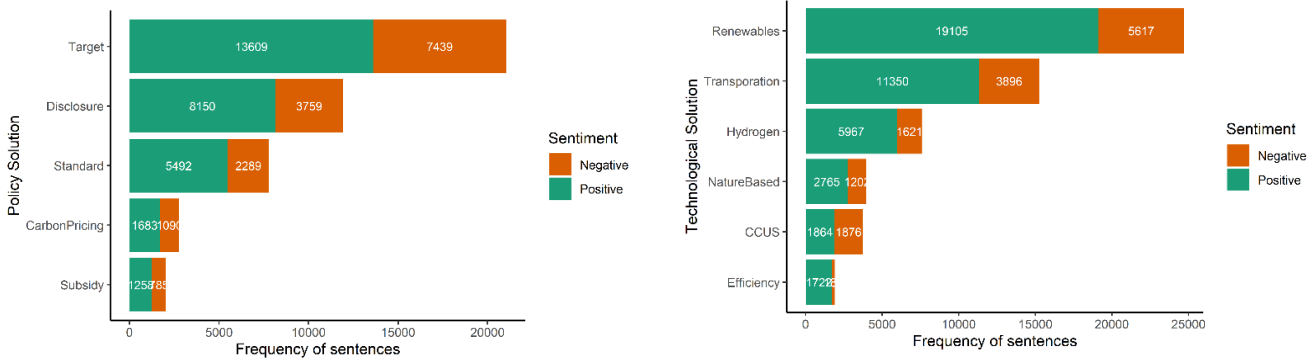
awareness and support for climate action. News media can be a powerful catalyst in mobilizing public support for an issue, influencing policy, and affecting social change. News media can also be an effective proxy for understanding stakeholder perceptions where survey-based methodologies are infeasible due to time, cost, or ethical constraints.

However, news media can also pose a significant barrier to meaningful change. Divisive or distorted coverage on economic costs or feasibility challenges can fuel confusion, apathy, and political polarization among the public and discourage governments from pursuing ambitious goals.

Further, deductive approaches for text analysis provide opportunities to delineate how stakeholders perceive certain interventions. We find, for example, that technological solutions like renewables, hydrogen, and carbon sequestration both appear more frequently and have a more positive sentiment than policy solutions like targets, disclosures, and standards. Combining stakeholder to solution, we find that stakeholders from the finance and industry sectors, who may face economic losses or regulatory constraints from climate action, tend to emphasize technological solutions over policy solutions, whereas stakeholders from the policy sector, who may have more authority or responsibility to enact change, tend to emphasize policy solutions over technological solutions.

Next steps: Engaging Stakeholders for a Net Zero Future

The findings highlight the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement in the design and implementation of effective and acceptable climate policies. Engagement strategies that speak to stakeholders "where they are at" can contribute to more acceptable outcomes that balance the need for accelerated climate action with stakeholders' concerns. This does not necessarily require agreement among these diverse groups, rather that bespoke policy interventions and associated communication should be tailored to speak to the diverse perspectives and interests of key stakeholders like industry, finance, government, and citizens. Industry stakeholders may, for example, be more receptive to technological solutions, so policies such as clean technology innovation incentives and public investments to scale up such innovation may gain more support. Accounting for varied stakeholder perspectives and interests is key to designing and implementing policies that align with public discourse and garner widespread support. Likewise, understanding ongoing shifts in public discourse can help design effective communication strategies about new climate policies that may be subject to lack of awareness or polarization.



References

Dordi, T., Rhodes, E., Majerbi, B. & McPherson, M. (In Progress). Shifting Perceptions on Climate Action: A sentiment analysis of news media.