badvertising

Promoting pollution before reporting the climate

How press coverage of the United Nations climate conference is subsumed by advertising for high carbon consumer goods and services.

Finding pathways for rapid transition to a fair economy that thrives within planetary ecological boundaries.

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The Badvertising campaign is kindly supported by the KR Foundation whose mission is to address the root causes of climate change and environmental degradation.

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About the author

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Introduction

> **"How far can journalism go when it is bankrolled by forces that have everything to gain from blocking large-scale action to address our climate crisis?"**
>
> **- Andreas Gustavsson, the editor-in-chief, Dagens ETC**

Energy conglomerates, travel companies, airlines and banking and investment houses are promoting high carbon products and lifestyles, polluting our national press with their advertising. All national newspapers continue to advertise a wide range of discretionary 'lifestyle' high carbon, polluting goods and services. This is happening despite the call from the scientific community for immediate, rapid and comprehensive reductions in their consumption in the face of climate and health emergencies.

World leaders are now preparing for the 30th United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change annual conference of the parties (COP30) being held in Belém, Brazil, in November 2025. The event will ensure coverage of climate change across the British print media, coverage that will inevitably appear alongside advertising for high carbon goods and services.

Indeed, national newspapers in Britain published more advertising for high carbon travel than articles about the UNFCCC conference of the parties international climate negotiations in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2024 (COP29), on the two crucial days of reporting the event. Most of the national daily news publications promote long haul flights and ocean cruises under their own branding, despite these being among the most polluting and irredeemably damaging activities in terms of the climate crisis.

These are the key findings from a detailed analysis of the 10 national print newspapers published in the UK following the opening and closing days of COP29. These news publications remain profoundly influential over the news agenda, and in terms of normalising habits and lifestyles.

There is a clear conflict of interests. António Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, has called for a worldwide ban on advertising from oil and gas companies. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has provided an Advisory Opinion that confirms nation states "ensure the protection of the climate system and other parts of the environment from anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions" in July 2025. Customary international law further confirms states must "use all means at their disposal to prevent activities carried out within their jurisdiction or control from causing significant harm to the climate system and other parts of the environment", according to the ICJ advisory. It would be reasonable to conclude from this that states should legally be obliged to prevent the active promotion of pollution that causes significant harm to the climate, such as high carbon advertising. The leading international law firm Slaughter and May states: "[T]he ICJ's findings are relevant to companies due to their potential implications for State-level regulation and scope to bolster arguments advanced by climate and environmental groups in domestic strategic climate litigation."

Advertising in the UK for high carbon products in the printed press stimulates unnecessary, additional or 'induced' demand that would not otherwise be there. It also sends a message to newspaper readers that the climate emergency does not require us to stop buying high carbon goods and services.

We argue states have an obligation to regulate the advertising industry to prevent the artificial stimulation of demand for high carbon goods and services. The reporting of the climate issue itself often reinforces the idea that no substantial behaviour change is necessary. For example, the Daily Mail focused on the hypocrisy of world leaders flying to the climate conference in private jets while in the same issue encouraging readers to take high carbon holidays. The position national print newspapers have taken is untenable: they cannot represent the interests of their readers and continue to promote unnecessary high carbon products, the impacts from which threaten those same readers.

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero confirmed that "the government is committed to reducing emissions from high carbon products" following a debate in the House of Commons in July 2025, after more than 110,000 people in Britain called for a ban on fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship. However, the department took no action and stated only that "there are currently no plans to restrict fossil fuel advertising".

Air pollution alone from the burning of fossil fuels is estimated to kill between five and eight million people per year, making it one of the world's major causes of premature deaths even before climate impacts due to global heating are considered. We also know that the precedent of the ban on tobacco advertising in the 2000s was effective in reducing "exposure to pro-tobacco marketing influences[1]" and the harms to public health.

The newspaper industry in the United Kingdom is in crisis, with a reduction in the quality of output and unending rounds of redundancies for journalists. The small number of major news companies that have survived are dependent on advertising from high carbon goods and services. We as a society need to develop new ways of funding the dissemination of factual information, which could include taxation.

Key Findings

We have found that all 10 of the national newspapers continue to advertise high carbon industries, such as airlines, energy companies and car manufacturers. The conflict is clearest when it comes to travel advertising. The majority of national newspapers promote high carbon travel, namely long haul flights and ocean cruises. Newspapers often advertised travel under their own brands, with the name of the actual provider appearing in smaller print. This is true for newspapers that claim to represent different sides of the political spectrum, and which are published by each of the major publishing companies (UK News, Reach, Daily Mail and General Trust, Telegraph Media Group, Guardian Media Group).

Here we set out the key findings from our original analysis.

- There is a strong correlation between UK national print newspapers carrying a significant amount of travel advertising and then featuring very limited reporting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP29) event in November 2024 and the issue of climate breakdown more generally.

- The COP29 conference took up just two per cent of all editorial space in the 10 national newspapers on the two days when the issue was highest on the international news agenda, with additional reporting that included any mention at all of the climate issue making up a further 0.5 per cent of the available editorial space.

- The UK national print media missed two significant and obvious opportunities to discuss concrete climate impacts during the COP29 conference: the Valencia flood protests in Spain and Storm Bert in the UK. We found that only one report of these events, out of 19 articles across 1320.25 column inches, even mentioned climate change.

- National newspapers overall dedicated more space to advertising high carbon travel (1,745 ins) than reporting the COP29 conference (1,540 ins) on the key dates of the event. Individual newspapers that carried self-branded travel adverts dedicated more space to high carbon travel advertising than to reporting the COP29 conference. The total amount of high carbon advertising amounted to 5,086 ins, more than three times (3.3x) the space given to coverage of the climate conference.

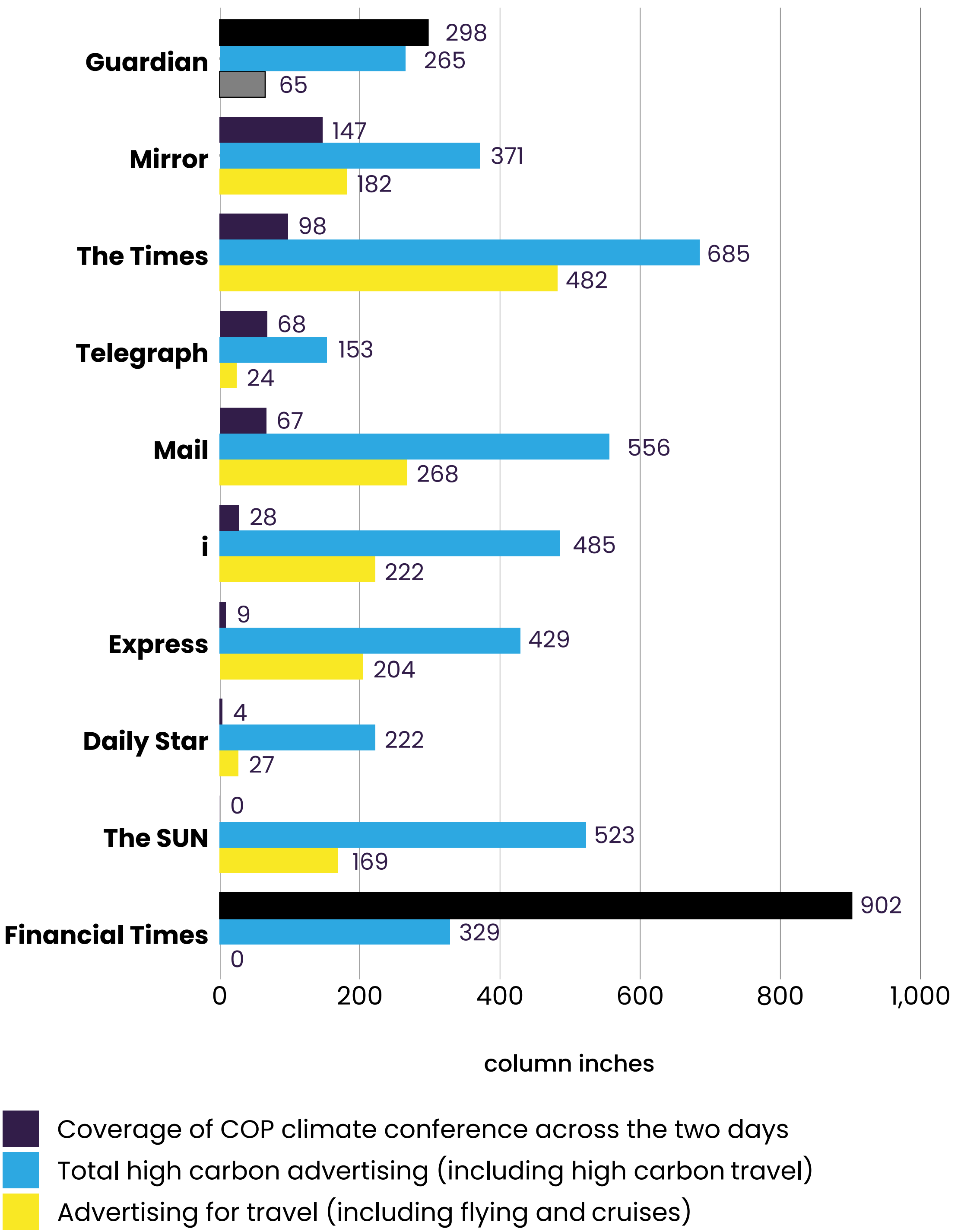
- The Financial Times was the only newspaper not to carry any travel advertising during the two key days reporting the conference. The newspaper also had the most coverage of COP29. The FT carried no advertising for energy companies, energy adjacent products, travel, or supermarkets on either of the two days that fall into the scope of this report. It did carry 329 ins of advertising for the banking and investments sector.

- Supermarkets remain major advertisers in the UK printed press. Supermarkets are the site of sale of a wide range of high carbon products, including petrol, meat, travel, banking and insurance. The main stores - including Sainsbury's, Asda, Tesco - placed a total of 445 ins of adverts on Monday, 11 November and a further 1,103 ins on Monday, 25 November.

- The energy sector was conspicuous in its absence from the pages of the print newspapers on the opening day and the morning after the closing day of COP29. The energy sector placed less than half of one per cent (0.49) of the adverts that appeared across the 10 national print newspapers on the two days of the COP29 conference being examined. The industry seems to have invested in social media, sponsorship and lobbying instead of traditional print advertising.

- The Guardian is the only national newspaper which has made a commitment to end advertising for coal, oil and gas companies. The publication carried an advert for EDF opposite its climate coverage during COP29: according to the EDF's own public disclosures, the company generates six percent of its energy from burning gas[2].

Coverage of COP climate conference, total high carbon advertising and advertising for high carbon travel



The Rationale

The aim of this small study was to gain some insight into the relationship between national print newspapers in Britain and their advertisers, and whether this had any influence over coverage of climate change, and in particular the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties international climate negotiations taking place in November 2024. This report is based on a spot analysis of two days of publications from the 10 major print daily newspapers in Britain where we would expect the most reporting of COP29: from Monday, 11 November 2024 and Monday, 25 November 2024. We also provide context to explain the importance of our findings. We are able to show, and to quantify, the extent to which advertising for high carbon products is given significantly more space than articles warning about the climate emergency.

It was announced at the COP28 in the United Arab Emirates that the following year's event would take place in Baku, Azerbaijan across two weeks from Monday, 11 November and Friday, 22 November. These countries both have economies that are highly dependent on their respective oil industries. The climate policy website Carbon Brief predicted ahead of the event that the COP29 event would end at 3.25am on Sunday, 24 November[3]. It was decided that for this study that the newspapers to be analysed would be from the opening day, Monday, 11 November 2024, and then the first full day coming after the official conclusion of the conference, which would be Monday, 25 November 2024. This proved to be the correct approach. Carbon Brief later reported that "COP29 eventually ended at 5.31am[4] on Sunday 24 November, 35 hours over time."

This new report builds on years of research from the Badvertising campaign and supports the claim that newspaper advertising remains a significant promoter of high carbon, polluting products and lifestyles. However, as Upton Sinclair, the author of 1926 novel Oil!, famously remarked: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

Advertising

António Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, said on Wednesday, 5 June 2024: “I urge every country to ban advertising from fossil fuel companies. And I urge news media and tech companies to stop taking fossil fuel advertising.” The *In Our Hands*[5] report from the House of Lords in the UK, published in October 2022, highlighted the fact that a third of emissions reductions needed by 2035 would have to come from travel, food and the heating of homes. It described advertising as a “powerful influence on customer behaviour on a large scale” adding that “measures to regulate advertising of high carbon and environmentally damaging products” would be necessary.

However, this report demonstrates that national newspapers in the UK continue to advertise high carbon goods and services. The national print newspapers in the UK carried a total of 92,859 ins of content on Monday, 11 November 2024 and Monday, 25 November 2024, of which 19,379 ins (or 21 percent) was advertising. We estimate that 80 per cent of newspaper advertising was paid for, a total of 15,622 ins. In turn, 32.6 per cent of paid adverts were for companies selling high carbon products. This includes energy companies; high carbon travel, which is dominated by cruises and flights; products and services that are inseparable from the energy sector, such as boiler insurance; banks and investments, which we assume would include investments in high energy industries; and also supermarkets, which sell the majority of agricultural produce and in some cases have their own chain of petrol stations.

The single largest category of paid-for advertising for high carbon products was travel (including adverts under the newspapers’ own branding) at 1,745 ins across both dates, or 9 percent of all adverts. The next most dominant form of paid advertising was for major supermarkets, including Asda, Sainsbury’s and Tesco who are significant petrol retailers. These adverts made up 7.9 per cent of newspaper advertising. The newspapers carried 1,134 ins of advertising for banking and investment firms, or

5.9 per cent. Notably, adverts for energy companies made up less than half of one per cent of adverts in the newspapers on the two days in the scope of this research, with just 95 ins of promotions placed on both days taken together. EDF Renewables placed a 35 ins advert for its renewable products on Monday, 11 November; OVO placed two half-page adverts, taking up 60 ins, for its "beyond energy savings account" on Monday, 25 November. Finally, companies which we considered to be adjacent to the energy sector - primarily the car industry - accounted for 564 ins of promotions, or a relatively small 2.9 per cent share of all advertising.

Travel

Tourism is responsible for 17 per cent of carbon emissions across the UK, according to Statista[6]. The country is the third highest internationally when it comes to emissions from flights. Transport, including leisure travel, is the most polluting sector in the British economy, according to the government. A total of 28 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions came from transport in 2022, and this increased two percent from 2021, according to the most recent figures available from Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. A short haul flight will create 255g of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions for every kilometre travelled, compared to 192g for a petrol car, 105g for a bus or coach, 41 for national trail and just 19g for the ferry, according to figures published by the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy in 2019.

National newspapers dedicated more space to advertising high carbon travel (1,745 ins) than reporting the COP29 conference (1,540 ins) on the key days of reporting the event. Newspapers are heavily reliant on high carbon travel advertising, with the sector accounting for 11.17 per cent of paid advertising coverage across the 10 newspapers for the two days. There is a strong correlation between a newspaper having less coverage of the COP29 conference when it had more travel advertising. The correlation was present for both days surveyed. These results are more stark than might appear for eight national newspapers as the Financial Times alone carried 902 ins (or 55.7 per cent) of the reporting of COP29 and none of the travel advertising.

Travel was the most lucrative category of advertising for The Times, The Sun, The Mail, The Express, The Mirror, The Telegraph, and The Daily Star - indeed all newspapers except The Guardian and The Financial Times. The Times appears to be the publication most heavily dependent on the sector for income with 482 ins of travel advertising, which accounted for 22 per cent of paid adverts in the newspaper. The Sun newspaper carried 168.5 ins of travel advertising and was the only newspaper not to mention COP29 at all either on the opening day or on the day after its close. The Sun relied on travel advertising for more than 12.4 per cent of its paid advertising on the two days. The newspaper also claims on its website to "send" 1.6 million Sun readers "on holiday each year[7] with Sun Hols". The Sun and The Times are both owned by News UK. News UK in turn is owned by News Corp in the US, with Rupert Murdoch being founder, chairman emeritus and former major shareholder.

The i newspaper relied on travel for 20 per cent of its paid advertising with 28 ins of copy on COP29 and 36 ins of travel promotion under its own brand. Helen Coffey, when travel editor at The Independent (then sister publication to the i), "became the first travel editor of a national UK publication to give up flying".

High carbon travel advertising

Newspaper	Column Inches	Percent COP29 travel advertising
The Times	482.00	28.85
Mail	268.00	16.04
Express	203.75	13.90
i	222.00	13.29
Mirror	182.25	10.91
The SUN	168.50	10.08
Guardian	65.00	3.89
Daily Star	27.00	1.62
Telegraph	24.00	1.44
Financial Times	0	0

The Daily Mail, understood to be the highest selling newspaper in the UK, printed 268 ins worth of travel adverts on the two days, of which 73 ins were promotions that used its own branding. This compares to just 66.5 ins of reporting about the COP29 conference, and a total of 118.25 ins of reporting that could be considered related to the climate crisis in any way. The Daily Mail is also the best example of how the substance of COP29 news coverage is not always in conflict with the need to sell travel advertising. The newspaper carried a 13 ins story about private jets being used by attendees of the conference on Friday, 8 November 2024 ahead of the official opening of the conference, alongside a further 616.5 ins of advertising for high carbon travel and tourism. Consumers are unlikely to forgo holidays when they can see the rich and powerful taking private jets to climate conferences.

The Daily Star carried only four ins of stories about the event, compared to 27 ins of self branded travel advertising, while the Express managed only nine inches of reports compared to an overwhelming 203.75 ins of self branded travel advertising. The Daily Telegraph carried only 24 ins of travel advertising across both days, this being a small advert for Cunard cruises on page nine of the newspaper. However, this compares to just

67.75 ins of reporting of COP29 in the broadsheet newspaper across both of the days. It might be noted that most of this reporting was negative.

The travel adverts placed in the national newspapers necessitated activities with among the highest carbon emissions. Indeed, 50 per cent of the travel adverts placed in national newspapers were for cruise holidays or package holidays built around cruises. The major travel advertisers included ROL Cruise, Travelsphere and Imagine Cruise. As an example, ROL Cruise, a travel agency, offers a single holiday which takes place over 124 nights and visits all six continents. The itinerary takes in 36 ports in 28 countries including the United States, Australia, Japan, and South Africa. The trip includes restaurants, live music, pools, gyms and spas. The rapid growth in cruise holidays and increase in cruise ship sizes has come at a significant environmental cost, according to the independent non-profit organisation Transport & Environment (T&E). In 2022, just 218 cruise ships in Europe used 2.5m tonnes of fuel, releasing 8.1m tonnes of carbon dioxide, an increase of 17 per cent from 2019. "These emissions are equivalent to those of 50,000 flights between Paris and New-York," states T&E. Cruise ships often use dirtier heavy fuels, and use the fuel to power onboard goods and services, such as restaurants.

The main advertiser was ROL Cruise with 455 ins of adverts across the two days analysed, or 33 per cent of all travel adverts. ROL Cruise describes itself as the "UK's No.1 Independent Cruise Specialist" and sells trips with P&O Cruises, Cunard, Ambassador Cruise Line and Regent Seven Seas Cruises. Imagine Cruising, which is also an agency selling holidays with cruise lines such as P&O Cruises and Cunard, placed 260 ins of adverts (19 percent of travel adverts placed). This means that these two cruise companies made up more than half of all travel advertising in the national printed press.

A further 43 per cent of the travel adverts were for flights or packages that involved taking flights. This meant that just seven per cent of the travel adverts promoted low carbon methods of transportation, such as ferries and coaches.

The package holiday company Travelsphere advertised with a four-page pull out in one issue of the Times, covering 260 ins of newsprint, which represented 31 percent of travel advertising on that particular day. Another regular advertiser was Newmarket, which paid for 175 ins of adverts, or 13 per cent of the promotions on the two days. Smaller package holiday companies selling cruises and flights alongside hotel accommodation and meals included GN Holidays, Just Go and Just You with less than five per cent each of the newspaper advertising coverage on the two days.

Individual newspapers that carried self-branded travel adverts dedicated more space to travel advertising than to reporting the COP29 conference. The Times carried the most self-branded travel advertising at 317 ins. This compares to just 97.5 ins of stories about the COP29 conference published in the same editions of the newspaper. A total of 14 per cent of paid advertising in the Times newspaper was self-branded travel promotions. The Express newspaper was even more dependent on self-branded travel advertising, which made up a total of 17 per cent of the advertising space it had sold on those days. The Financial Times, The Guardian and The Telegraph did not carry self-branded travel advertising.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Financial Times was the only newspaper not to carry any travel advertising at all during the two most newsworthy days of the conference. The "pink paper" also had the most coverage, with a total of 902 ins of reporting of COP29 forming part of 1,001 ins of articles about the climate issue more broadly. On Monday, 11 November 2024, the FT carried a staggering 72 per cent of the coverage of COP29 for that day. The Financial Times also carried the most reporting about the COP and the climate issue in general the morning after COP29 had announced its agreements, with 184 ins of content.

The Guardian carried the second most coverage of the COP29 conference with 297.5 ins of copy, or 18 per cent of all news about the conference published, on the two days assessed. The newspaper carried a single travel advert during this time, a full-page colour promotion for Turkish Airlines on page 21 that would have brought in an estimated income of £18,000. The advert accounted for eight per cent of the paid advertising in The Guardian for the two days we reviewed.

Investments and banking

Investment and banking corporations have significant interests in fossil fuel companies - and are the ultimate beneficiaries of the extraction and burning of coal, oil and gas. Financial institutions globally advanced a further $869bn in loans and support to fossil fuel companies in the last 12 months alone. JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Citigroup, Mizuho Financial and Wells Fargo advanced the most cash. Natwest, Barclays, HSBC, Lloyds Banking Group all increased the number of projects they were investing in, according to the latest report from the Banking in Climate Chaos Coalition. Natwest was among the banks advertising in national newspapers during COP29.

The banking and investment sector placed 706 ins of adverts on Monday, 11 November and a further 428 ins of adverts on Monday, 25 November making a total of 1,134 ins of advertising across both days. This was, for both days, 5.9 per cent of all advertising across all 10 newspapers. The Financial Times carried 329 ins of advertising during the two days examined, or 27 percent of all paid advertising in the newspaper. In turn, the FT carried no advertising for energy companies, energy adjacent products, travel, or supermarkets on either of the two days that fall into the scope of this report. The banking and investment sector also placed adverts in the Telegraph, with 129 ins of ads appearing across both days and making up 8.4 per cent of paid adverts; the Times (95 ins and 4.8 percent); the Sun (35 ins or 2.2 percent) and also the i (30 ins, 2.6) but refrained from advertising on either day in the Mail, Mirror, Guardian, Express and Daily Star.

Energy

The energy sector was conspicuous in its absence from the advertisements published by print newspapers on the opening day and the morning after the closing day of COP29. Indeed, the sector placed just 35 ins of adverts, or 0.36 per cent of all advertising, on Monday, 11 November and 60 ins, or 0.62, on Monday, 25 November. This means that across both days the energy sector placed less than half of one per cent (0.49) of the adverts that appeared across the 10 national print newspapers on the two days of the COP29 conference being examined. Oil companies have historically placed newspaper adverts to coincide with policymakers making decisions that impact the industry. For example, Equinor placed its "Broader Energy" adverts in UK news publications as the government was deciding the fate of the Rosebank oil and gas field - spots that were later banned for being misleading by the regulator.

The low level of newspaper advertising seems to be an indication of the collapse of the print publishing sector rather than a decision by energy companies not to use advertising around the COP events.

Fossil fuel companies have turned to social media platforms for advertising, including spreading disinformation about climate breakdown. Oil, gas and coal companies spent $17.6m with Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram among other platforms. Alex Murray, the head of advocacy at Conscious Advertising Network, reported in the publication Campaign that this allowed the companies to "push greenwashing messages that downplay their role as the single biggest reason for the climate crisis to more than 700 million users." The oil industry continues to spend significant sums of money sponsoring events at the conferences. For example, The International Emissions Trading Association hosted events at its COP29 BusinessHub pavilion which were sponsored by Chevron, ExxonMobil, SOCAR and TotalEnergies, as reported by Desmog. The UK pavilion at COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, was sponsored by AVEVA, a software company with more than 600 oil and gas customers including Shell, ExxonMobil, BP, Chevron, and the Abu Dhabi National

Oil Company. We also know that more than 1,700 oil and gas lobbyists attended COP in 2024 in person. With friends like these, who needs print newspapers?

The newspapers did carry 564 ins of adverts for products or services which we consider to be energy adjacent. This category made up a total of 2.9 per cent of advertising for the two days. The full page (65 ins) Citroen Electric advert which appeared on the back cover page of the i would be a good example of an energy adjacent advert. Electric vehicles are seen as part of the solution for the crisis, but of course can be charged up with energy from coal or gas fired power stations. We also included advertising for the Gas Safe Register and OVO's boiler insurance cover, among others, in this category. The Sun ran 151.5 ins of energy adjacent advertising, or 30.9 per cent of the advertising that we considered as falling into this category, published by the 10 publications. The i was responsible for 102.5 ins of energy adjacent advertising, or 20.9 per cent. The Mail, the Mirror and the Express all carried between 65 and 98 ins of adverts on the two days. The Telegraph, Daily Star, Times and Financial Times no adverts that fell within our category of energy adjacent. The Times carried a single advert for the OVO Beyond Energy Savings Account across two pages. The 60 ins of adverts made up three per cent of advertising in the Times across both days.

The Guardian ran a half-full page advert for EDF energy on page 14 immediately next to some of its coverage of the COP29 conference, generating an estimated income of £11,000. The Guardian therefore carried more than a third (36.8) of energy sector advertising placed during the two days of COP29 within the scope of this study. This advert made up just 2.8 per cent of the advertising that appeared in the newspaper across both days. The main headline that appeared on page 15 of The Guardian that day read: "Global firms must help to pay for action on climate crisis, says COP29 head" (a later subhead made the point "Money talks"). The advert carried the EDF logo followed by the slogan "CHANGING THE WORLD *One Home at a Time*". It said: "To discover more about solar, heat pump and charge point installation visit edfenergy.com/power[8]". It concluded with a second slogan: "CHANGE IS IN *OUR POWER*". As noted elsewhere, the Guardian has announced that it will not accept advertising from energy companies generating from fossil fuels, namely coal, oil and gas. According to the EDF company website, only 15.1 per cent of the power produced by the company is actually renewable. A total of 77.7 per cent comes from nuclear power stations that use non-renewable materials which in turn require intensive energy to mine. Further, the company makes clear that six per cent of its energy comes from gas, a fossil fuel. One per cent of the energy comes from “fuel” (presumably oil) and 0.1 per cent from coal. The Guardian ran a story on Sunday, 15 August 2021, warning: “The UK government has launched an investigation into renewable electricity deals amid growing concern over the extent of ‘greenwashing’ by large energy firms claiming to offer environmental benefits to customers.”

Supermarkets

The newspapers gave more space to adverts for supermarkets (1,548 ins) than to COP29 on the two key days. The supermarkets (in order, Sainsbury’s, Asda, Tesco, Morrisons, Waitrose, Aldi, Iceland) remain major advertisers in the UK printed press. The stores placed a total of 445 ins of adverts on Monday, 11 November and a further 1,103 ins on Monday, 25 November. The supermarket adverts across the national press made no mention of, and seemed totally unrelated to, the COP29 conference both in content and intent. Supermarkets are the site of sale for the agriculture industry, including meat, and often also for petrol, banking, travel and other high carbon goods and services.

Storms - coverage and attribution

The print news media in the UK dedicated a total of 1,539 ins of coverage to the COP29 conference on the day of its opening and the morning after it announced its final agreements. This was supplemented by a further 88.75 ins of copy about climate beyond the conference, and 207.75 ins which could be considered related (or adjacent) to the climate issue in general - such as renewable energy. This means the COP29 conference made up just two per cent of all editorial space in the 10 newspapers, with reporting with any connection at all to the climate issue making up 2.5 per cent on the days when the issue is most likely to be on the international news agenda. The coverage of the COP29 conference that was published was not entirely favorable, as one would expect. Indeed, right of centre newspapers including the Daily Mail used the event to carry attacks on the concept of net zero while centre newspapers such as The Guardian platformed concerns of activists that the conference was not achieving enough. This means the advertising of carbon intensive goods and services in the national print media is likely to have a much more powerful impact on readers than the environmental news coverage.

However, an even more significant finding from our analysis is that the national newspapers missed at least two significant and obvious opportunities to discuss concrete climate impacts during the COP29 conference: protests following the flooding in Valencia, Spain, and the impacts of Storm Bert in the UK.

Valencia

On Monday, 11 November 2024 some British newspapers (namely, the i, The Mirror, The Guardian, The Telegraph) covered the protests that followed the devastating flooding in the Valencia region of Spain. The newspapers, taken together, provided 330 ins of coverage of these events. The Mirror ran a huge image with a short story, together covering 200 ins of newsprint. The Telegraph ran a story across half of its broadsheet pages, and The Guardian also carried the story over half a page.

The flooding was both more likely and more severe because of climate breakdown. Yet none of the stories about the impacts of this extreme weather event on the local community in Valencia even mentioned climate change. This lack of contextualisation in the print media on Monday was despite the fact that the relation between climate and the Valencia floods was well understood at that time and information about the link between events in Valencia and climate breakdown were easily available to the newspapers. For example, Rebecca Spare-Cole, the sustainability reporter at the PA (formally Press Association) news wire to which all newspapers subscribe, reported at 00:01 on that morning as follows: "The meeting (COP29) kicks off against a backdrop of deadly weather events, extreme conditions and record temperatures in recent months. These include the floods in Valencia…" The World Meteorological Organization, based in the United States, ran an article online[9] while the floods were still taking place which stated the tragedy "underlines why the top priority of the WMO community is to save lives as climate change super charges extreme weather". It quoted Omar Baddour, chief of climate monitoring at WMO, as saying the weather phenomenon that exacerbated the Valentinian floods is being made worse by climate heating. "Climate change is expected to make these systems more intense because of warmer sea waters and increased moisture in the atmosphere." The Guardian had run a story earlier about the Valencia flooding being a "harbinger" of climate impacts, but did not make this point in the reporting of the protests that followed, published on the days we reviewed.

Storm Bert

Even more noticeable was the lack of reference to climate breakdown in the coverage of Storm Bert in the UK that was published on Monday, 25 November 2024. The national press carried a total of 990 ins of coverage of the single weather event on the day after the close of the COP29 conference - almost double the coverage of the global climate crisis. The tabloid news editors agreed that the story should make a double page spread, with most placing it across pages eight and nine. The newspapers found consensus that there was no need to mention climate, nor the flooding taking place globally, or even the floods they had reported on two weeks earlier in Spain. Among all this coverage of the storm, only the i mentioned climate change, and this reference was limited to a short observation made in the final sentence of the story. This was despite the fact that the PA news wire ran a story at 19:07 on Sunday, 24 November 2024 reporting that Eluned Morgan, the Welsh First Minister, had discussed the storm as being related to climate change. The BBC, not within the scope of this study, further reported on Sunday that Baroness Morgan had added that climate was "clearly making a difference in the severity and the frequency of these weather events." The PA news wire sent out copy at 13:18 on Monday quoting Steve Reed, the environment secretary, linking Storm Bert to climate change. He was reported as saying: "Because of climate change, we're getting severe weather events much more frequently." The Guardian did copy and paste a PA report onto its online live news feed quoting Steve Reed referencing "the impact of climate change that we're seeing with these floods". This report also quoted Adrian Ramsay, co-leader of the Green party at the time, stating: "These storms are increasingly driven by climate breakdown". However, these public statements about the link between the storm and the wider climate crisis were not included in any print news coverage, including that of The Guardian.

Precedents

UK

The Guardian announced on Wednesday, 29 January 2020 that it would no longer accept advertising from oil and gas companies[10] - claiming to be the first "global news organisation" to "institute an outright ban on taking money from companies that extract fossil fuels". The newspaper described the decision as a direct response to the fact that "lobbying by energy companies had explicitly harmed the environmental cause". These corporate efforts include the use of advertising in the national media, as The Guardian acknowledged. The newspaper revealed alongside the announcement that 40 percent of the revenue of GMG, its owner, is derived from advertising. The publisher claimed that it could not extend the ban to adverts for other high carbon products, such as airlines and cars. Anna Bateson, then acting chief executive, and Hamish Nicklin, the chief revenue officer, said in a joint statement: "Stopping those ads would be a severe financial blow, and might force us to make significant cuts…"

The **British Medical Journal** banned advertising and research funded by companies that produce fossil fuels in 2020. The weekly peer-reviewed journal went further and became the first major publication in the world to refuse advertising from banks that fund fossil fuel production and use in October 2024. Barclays, HSBC, NatWest, Santander and Lloyds were all told that the magazine would not carry advertising for those companies because they continued to bankroll fossil fuels. The BMJ stated in an editorial[11]: "We will now strengthen our advertising policy further, following criticisms from readers that we carried advertising in our weekly print edition for Barclays Bank, a major funder of the fossil fuel industry." It added: "Climate commitments and pledges are important, but they are meaningless without action."

The **New Scientist** magazine stopped accepting sponsorship from oil and arms companies for its live events in 2022 after academics began withdrawing. However, the publication has not publicly stated that it had banned advertising from fossil fuel companies. Shell had sponsored the Earth Zone at the New Scientist Live event in 2018. BP was listed as a zone sponsor for 2019. However, after several scientists pulled out of the event that year the oil company was removed as a sponsor. Dr Emma Garnett, a sustainability research fellow at the University of Cambridge, was among those that withdrew. "It is vital organisations refuse fossil fuel sponsorship[12] because these companies are polluting our discussions as well as our planet," she told the climate investigations website DeSmog.

Rest of Europe

Le Monde, among France's leading news publications, announced on 21 April 2023, that it had "set itself the goal of gradually reducing the proportion of advertising for products and activities based solely on the use of fossil fuels[13]" in its annual climate statement. The publication went further: "Le Monde informs its readers about the impact of their consumption choices and aims to gradually give less space to products and leisure activities that are most harmful to the environment."

The Swedish newspaper **Dagens ETC** committed in September 2019 to stop taking advertising from high carbon industries[14]. The ban extended to any advertising that promotes fossil fuel based goods and services, beyond energy companies themselves. The newspaper at the time of the announcement had advertising reviews of £85,000 and anticipated that a fifth of this came from advertising they would no longer accept. Andreas Gustavsson, the editor in chief, said at the time: "How far can journalism go when it is bankrolled by forces that have everything to gain from blocking large-scale action to address our climate crisis?"

Dagens Nyheter, a second Swedish newspaper, announced it would restrict advertising from fossil fuel companies[15]. Its new policy reads: "On our premium formats (large ads on the front page, "takeovers" on the site, etc.) we do not publish ads from actors who have the majority of their income from the fossil industry." The newspaper said the move followed concerns raised by its readers, which intensified after the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg guest edited an issue of the publication. The statement ran: "One of the most common reactions we have received in recent years has been that readers want us to cover the climate crisis more and that we should not have advertising content that goes in the opposite direction." [Quotes translated to English using Google Translate.]

United States

Vox Media committed in 2021 to "no longer accept ad dollars[16] from fossil fuel companies." The media company publishes New York (including Intelligencer, The Cut, Vulture, The Strategist, Curbed, and Grub Street), The Verge, Vox, SB Nation, Eater, and Polygon. The advertising ban extended to companies that mine resources that are non-renewable, such as fossil gas. Ryan Pauley, chief revenue officer, Vox Media, said: It's clear that every company has an important role to play when it comes to the climate crisis".

The **New York Times** has publicly confirmed that it does not take fossil fuel advertising or sponsorship[17] for its Climate Hub team or regular Climate newsletter. However this ban does not extend to the publication as a whole. Stephen Dunbar-Johnson, the NYT's international president, told The Drum website in 2021 that the newspaper relied on advertising to fund its journalism, but offered an assurance that "the journalism ignores all advertising". He specifically stated that an advert from ExxonMobil would not deter the paper from publishing an investigation into that company. "We have an advertising standards team that checks our advertising on its veracity and if we find any untruthfulness we won't accept it. However, the blunt reality is that advertising supports our journalism."

Taking Action

We hope that the millions of people who still buy print newspapers will want to become activist readers. They can do so by writing to the editor, the owner even, and demanding that the publication adopt a low carbon advertising policy. This would mean refusing to carry promotions for fossil fuel companies - even those that also use solar panels, wind farms and nuclear reactors. We believe the advertising ban should also extend to travel companies selling flights and ocean cruises, the supermarkets selling petrol and beef, and the banks and investment houses that continue to fund fossil fuel production. If our polite requests fall on deaf ears, readers may want to cancel their print and online subscriptions and choose more serious news publications instead.

We hope this report will be useful for this army of activist readers. We trust that these readers can find their own examples of the conflict of interest between reporting the climate and accepting high carbon advertising and can use the information to fortify their case further. The information presented here will show that such examples are part of a wider trend. We believe that The Guardian would be the British newspaper most susceptible to lobbying from its readers. The newspaper has committed to refusing fossil fuel advertising but continues to carry promotions for high carbon activities such as flying, sometimes right next to its climate reporting. Relatedly, this study suggests the Financial Times carried the most, and the best, climate reporting during COP29 while also having the fewest adverts for energy, travel and supermarket companies. The time for urgent and dramatic action to prevent climate breakdown is now. If humanity does not meet this challenge, even billionaire newspaper proprietors will find themselves cast into the dustbin of history.

This report provides new information that newspaper readers can use to call on publishers, both owners and editors, to adopt low carbon advertising policies. Some readers might want to go further and cancel any newspaper subscriptions if their requests are ignored. We have seen a few examples around the world of newspapers ending advertising for oil and gas because of reader demands.

Conclusion

National print newspapers in the UK claim to be a source of reliable information for the public, and the content they publish continues to have a huge influence over broadcast media and online content, from Instagram to Substack. The findings of this study suggest that the 10 newspapers published and distributed across the UK are fundamentally failing to coherently communicate to the public that climate breakdown is an emergency and a clear and present danger to our societies and communities. This failure is, in part, the result of two related decisions: firstly, the news desks of most national newspapers have decided not to report climate breakdown with the same urgency and clarity as other issues. Secondly, the national press continues to advertise companies that sell high carbon products such as fossil fuel energy, SUVs, travelling that includes long haul flights and ocean cruises and banking and investment. This report has attempted to shine a light on the second of these concerns.

We have found that some newspapers dedicated just inches of editorial space to covering the UNFCCC COP29 conference in 2024. The COPs are the most important international climate events of any year. Further, all national newspapers carry reams of advertising for high carbon goods and services alongside this reporting. The findings of this report might not come as a surprise to some climate activists. However, our experienced researchers were genuinely shocked at how little reporting there was of the COP29 conference in the British media, and the extent to which high carbon products dominate the advertising space in our legacy publications.

At best, this sends a mixed message to readers. The newspaper reports may well say that reducing carbon emissions is urgent and important, but the highly compelling adverts placed next to them convince readers of the very opposite, that we should continue to buy goods even if their production causes huge amounts of carbon emissions. Some readers may think, ‘if the climate crisis were really so serious then surely our newspapers would stop advertising long haul flights?’ At worst, the newspapers with a right wing agenda promote high carbon products while simultaneously attacking climate scientists, politicians and activists - often calling them hypocrites for using products whose production will involve some carbon emissions. The wider result is that advocates for climate action are told they must achieve a democratic mandate and public support, but find themselves outspent and out-menovered by newspaper proprietors who themselves have a clear vested interest in persuading the public to ignore the dangers of climate breakdown and continue to buy high carbon goods.

Newspapers in Britain are in terminal decline, with print sales falling every year and journalists being made redundant or forced to reduce the quality of their content. In this crisis, the owners of newspapers might desperately accept any advertising revenue available. But we have also seen how the fossil fuel companies themselves has to a significant extent avoided advertising in newspapers during COP29, while continuing with huge spends for social media promotion, sponsorship and lobbying. Banning coal, oil and gas advertising from national newspapers on principle will not cost as much as would have historically been the case. The bigger picture is that we need a new funding model for journalism. There have always been huge compromises because the media is funded through advertising by the very corporations they are supposed to hold to account. As corporations grow larger, and wealthier, developing complex monopolies, this relationship has become untenable. Ultimately, we need more publicly and reader funded media that is independent and free of all advertising.

Further Reading

Badvertising: Polluting Our Minds and Fuelling Climate Chaos Andrew Simms and Leo Murray. Pluto Press, 2023.

Low Carbon Advertising Policies: A toolkit for local policymakers, Robbie Gillett. Badvertising, December 2024.

Advertising's role in climate and ecological degradation: What does the scientific research have to say? Tim Kasser, Emilie Tricarico, David Boyle and Andrew Simms. Badvertising, November 2020.

Appendices

1. Research method

A researcher bought 10 national newspapers from local supermarkets and newsagents on Friday, 8 November 2024, Monday, 11 November 2024 and then on Monday, 25 November 2024. The researcher then measured every advert, and newspaper article about climate, in each of the national newspapers. The newspaper adverts were classified into 'energy', 'energy adjacent', 'travel', 'supermarkets', 'banking' and 'miscellaneous'. These categories were chosen based on the industries that have a discernably high climate impact, and also based on a reasonable estimate of which industries were the most regular advertisers (see, Definition of high carbon products, below). The editorial content was categorised into 'COP29', 'climate' and 'climate adjacent' based on whether the article explicitly discussed the conference, whether it mentioned climate change as an issue or whether it merely discussed an issue that could easily be understood to relate to climate, most notably renewable energy. Where there were articles which were not about climate change as such, but did make mention of the issue, we created an entry based on the length of the paragraph which contained that mention.

2. Definition of high carbon products

High carbon travel: All adverts for flights and ocean cruises, and promotions for package holidays where these transport modes are necessary or an option. We do not include holidays that involve using ferries, coaches or 'self-drive'.
Notes: There are no low carbon options for commercial air travel currently available. Air travel has a particularly significant impact on climate because of where carbon is released in the atmosphere. Large cruise ships will use up to 80,645 gallons of marine fuel per day, according to a University of Colorado Boulder analysis. There is currently no feasible plan to convert ocean cruise ships to sails, or other low energy technologies.

Banking and investment: Banks and investment firms direct capital to high carbon practices, including fossil fuel production. **Notes**: There is overwhelming evidence that many high street banks and investment firms provide the capital necessary to continue with high carbon activities such as coal, oil and gas extraction, despite recent efforts to greenwash the industry. The major banks globally have provided £2 trillion to fossil fuel companies[18] since the 2015 Paris Agreement, according to the Rainforest Action Network.

Energy / Energy adjacent: We define energy companies as all firms that extract, refine, produce, supply and distribute or sell any fossil fuels. We use the term 'energy adjacent' for adverts from companies that sell products which depend on fossil fuel energy, such as cars, or are necessary for the continuation of such activities, such as car insurance.
Notes: We include companies in the category 'energy' when they sell any energy which is produced using fossil fuels (such as coal, oil or gas) even where their main product is renewable energy. We therefore include EDF Renewables. We define a company that is selling a product which is adjacent to energy production as 'energy adjacent'. For example, we include OVO's adverts for boiler insurance and savings accounts in the energy adjacent category. Travel, supermarkets and banking and investment could each be considered as a subcategory of energy adjacent. However, we only count each advert in one category.

Supermarkets: We include adverts for supermarkets as high carbon as they are the site of sale for the agriculture industry, and often also for petrol and other fossil fuels.
Notes: Supermarkets are by far the most dominant point of sale for agricultural products. Agriculture accounts for 10 per cent of the total greenhouse gas emissions of the UK, according to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs[19].

We use the term 'products' to refer to both goods (a car) and services (a flight). The distinction between high carbon impact and low carbon impact is necessarily subjective. For example, we do not classify luxury watches as high carbon even though the industrial processes (such as diamond mining) often have extremely deleterious ecological and social impacts. We also recognise that the production of almost all products have some negative climate impacts.

Related resources from Badvertising

Badvertising, 2024, **Olympic Smoke Rings: How the climate polluting sponsors using the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games for self-promotion will increase emissions.**

Badvertising, 2024, **'Dirty Snow: How polluters are destroying the winter sports they sponsor'.**

Badvertising, 2023, **'How to screen-out polluting sponsors: A low-carbon toolkit for sports organisations to navigate the issue of polluting sponsorship'.**

Badvertising, 2023, **Caught Offside with Offsets? Why offsetting won't solve sports' climate problem**

Badvertisiing, 2023, **Dangerous Driving: Why sport should drop sponsorship from major polluters - the cases of Toyota and BMW.**

Badvertising, 2021, **'Sweat Not Oil: Why sports should drop advertising and sponsorship from high-carbon polluters'.**

To find out more about the Badvertising campaign, please visit **badverts.org**

Endnotes

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2 https://www.edf.fr/en/the-edf-group/producing-a-climate-friendly-energy#:~:text=Nuclear%20energy,(scope%20of%20EDF%20Ltd).
3 https://www.carbonbrief.org/cop29-debriefed-22-november-2024-countries-split-on-climate-finance-fossil-fuel-transition-reaffirmed-latest-texts-analysed/#:~:text=Carbon%20Brief's%20analysis%20of,being%201%3A34am%20on%20Sunday.
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18 https://www.ran.org/bankingonclimatechange2019/
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