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# Choosing a dangerous limit for climate change: Public representations of the decision making process

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### Abstract

This paper examines how the claim of a two degrees dangerous limit to climate change is represented in the public sphere. The cultural circuits model is used to frame a discourse analysis and content analysis of UK news media, popular science books and advocacy literature. This analysis is supported with perspectives gleaned from semi-structured interviews with a range of expert actors. The results show that news reports largely ignore the two degree limit and where it is mentioned it is validated through invocation of anonymous expert knowledge. Discourses which do recognise uncertainties surrounding definitions of dangerous change still support the two degree limit. Primary sources show a rejection of the two degree limit as a division between safe and dangerous climate change. Arguments made by advocates that the concept at least allows the public to debate complex climate science is not supported by the manner in

which the limit is constructed in public discourses. The results demonstrate that public representations of the two degree limit idea have not evolved, despite developments in climate science casting doubt on the veracity of the two degree limit. The paper concludes that framing climate policy within the two degree metric is not delivering the hoped for emission reductions and it may therefore be appropriate for public discourses to recognise the role of non-scientific factors in defining how much climate change is dangerous. Such a change might prove an important step in the development of a more participatory debate about climate policy.

## Highlights

- This paper presents a discourse analysis of public commentaries on the two degree dangerous limit.
- The limit is described as scientific fact in UK press and much NGO literature.
- NGO publications and popular science books argue limit helps communicate complex climate science.
- In presentations and interviews expert actors critical of scientific basis for two degree limit.
- Claims that limit important for communication undermined by quantity and quality of coverage.



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## Keywords

Dangerous climate change; Uncertainty; Public engagement; Public understanding of science; Popular media

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