

Climate change in Spain's media

A deficient answer

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This article states the importance of the role media plays, towards environmental problems, in public awareness. This is based on the media's capacity to influence large audiences. The article also depicts the upward but still insufficient trend of the information which is communicated by Spain's media regarding the environment, particularly climate change.

The most relevant aspects which explain why climate change is not receiving enough coverage are emphasized. These aspects are: excessive relevance given to conflictive and catastrophic events, technical complexity when communicating environmental problems in simpler terms, a generalized perception that makes climate change sound like a foreign problem whose solution has nothing to do with the individual taking action, climate change's deficient presence in Spain's media and governmental attitude, in which is placed the power to actively involve media in their answers to environmental decay.

Key Words: environment, climate change, media, Spain

1. Media's Role in Environmental Awareness

IF I KNEW I HAD A 50% CHANCE of suffering a train accident, I would never step on a train. Surely, chances for a climate change are far higher. Why, then, is nobody concerned about this matter and doing something about it?" Dinyar Godrej (2002:11), from *The New Internationalist*, would join with academics in this complaint. They would lament that citizens would have little interest in environmental issues. Even those who know about the seriousness of this matter would not take palliative measures.

Climate change is considered by most Europeans (62%) as one of the most serious problems in the world. It is placed above international terrorism (53%) and economic recession (24%) (Eurobarometre 300, 2008). Spanish citizens (61%) are on an equal level with the European average (Eurobarometre 300, 2008). 28.4% think climate change is the most important environmental problem. This figure is far above the 15.2% of the population that opted for general pollution and the 8.5% for lack of water. Logically, more than half of the Spanish population (52%) follows the news on environmental decay with interest (Barómetro CIS, Spain, 2007).

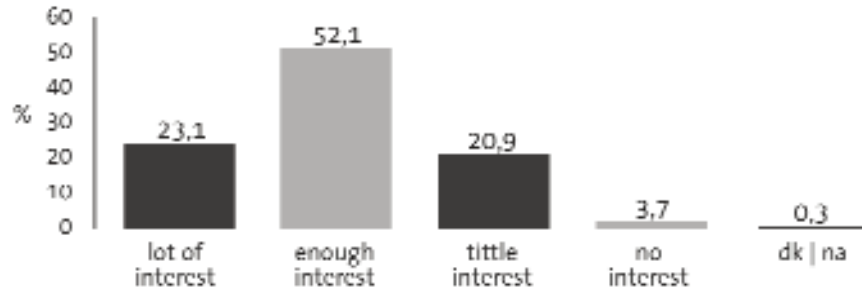
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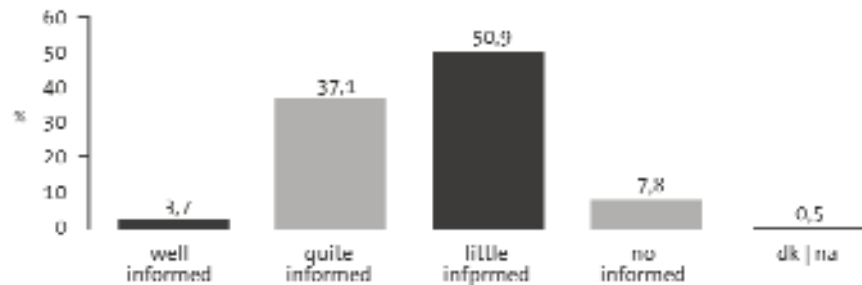
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Figure 1. How much interest do you place in following environmental news?



Taken from data taken from CIS barometer on environmental issues, November 2007.

Figure 2. How well informed are you on environmental issues?



Taken from CIS 2682 Study on Ecology and Environment, March, 2007.

The concern shown in this survey about environmental matters is not enough to make citizens take action on this issue. More than half (50.9%) think they are poorly informed (CIS 2007) over environmental issues. Considering this, shouldn't media play a more relevant role in the consolidation of environmental public awareness?

In 1963, Bernard Cohen referred to media, family units and school or religion, as the major means for culture transmission. He was strongly declaring that their power to tell readers what they should think about something was vast. However, they do not always do so. These words clearly expressed the media's capacity to give orientation on the topics that arise socially in everyday conversation. The concept of environment is built through the mentioned social institutions which play an important role in what and how we see and experience matters that concern us, particularly environment. Concerning this, Ashley Palmer (2004) says that "public attitudes and actions toward environment protection are largely shaped and influenced by the media."

In 1996, Joaquín Araujo (1996: 170-171), naturalist and communicator, insisted that clearly media coverage in Spain regarding environmental issues would reach the same level as other European countries and the rest of the world. He added that "nothing new will be created or renewed without media's input." Since then, Spain has made considerable progress in environmental classroom education and in environmental coverage in press, magazines, radio and television. According to CIS, 82.3% of those Spanish citizens who think they are well informed on environment matters, say that their major resource is the media. Internet (17.4%), town halls (11%) and ecologic organizations (10%) are far behind. Information availability is not enough to create reliable awareness that such problem needs to be solved. However, it is the first step towards it.

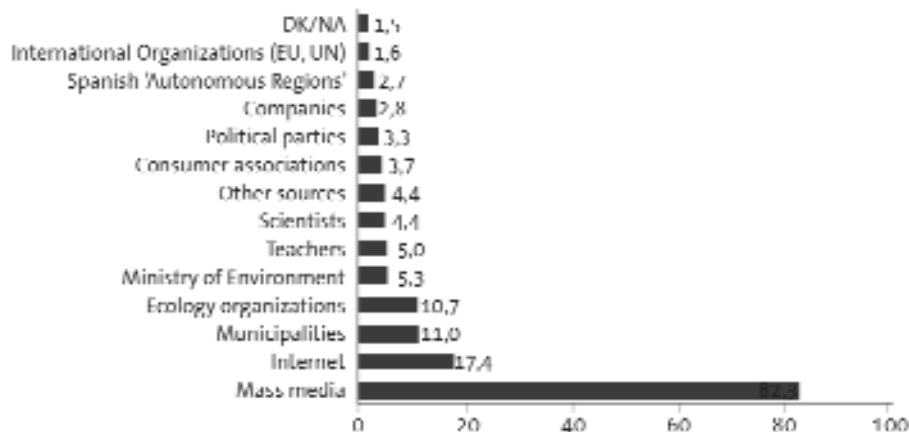




2. Environmet in Spain's media

During the seventies, the Spanish zoologist Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente and his TV series *El Hombre y la Tierra* (*Human Being and the Earth*) boosted a Jacques Cousteau-style model which marked the beginning of environmental coverage by the media in Spain. Some other naturalists followed his sample, such as Joaquín Araujo. However, it was at the end of the eighties, when private and regional TV channels took off, that a topic diversification was launched. This allowed environmental issues to have real screen time. Nonetheless, according to Díaz León (2007:194), as time went by, environmental matters were relegated to specialized sections and took a secondary place in TV programming. Moreover, it was minimized to public service, basically disappearing from private TV and radio channels.

Figure 3. Those who consider themselves to be well or quite informed about environment, what are their main information sources?



Taken from Study on Ecology and Environment, CIS 2682, March, 2007.

After the *Earth Summit*, held in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, it looked like environmental information was finally going to stop being anecdotal information in the media. There started a new environmental literature flow. Luis Guijarro (2004), president of the Association of Journalists for Environmental Information, says that even "politicians, through their presence in international summits and especially in the media, were backing up this information that had been for years trying to find its niche in Spain's editorials."

Certainly, environmental information in Spain has greatly increased since then. However, it is still far below some other information interest areas, like economy, sports or culture. This happens in spite of the fact that Spanish citizens believe that media information on environment and ecology (2,99 over 5) does not satisfy the interest they have in this matter (3,48 over 5), according to the last National Survey on Social Awareness of Science and Technology (VVAA 2004: 275).

In the audiovisual scope, environmental information started when Fran Llorente, director of *La 2 Noticias*, the Spanish government channel for specialized issues, created a space for this purpose. Over time, different TV channels have also been showing growing interest in these matters. Leading these initiatives is Canal Natura, the first thematic environmental channel in Spain. It broadcast the only daily news on environment in the country. Still, the Spa-





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nish news devote about 45% of their time to sports and politics. Only 2.3% is set apart for environmental news, according to the magazine *Consumer* (2002). There is another study which confirms this. It has been produced by researchers from several Spanish universities. The study reveals that environment is still a marginal issue in the news, although there is considerable coverage quality. Bienvenido León (2007: 354-373) explains this is because of the highly competitive circumstances that surround TV channels. These channels chose to prioritize some topics that may be more attractive to the audiences, whether the topic is or is not a reliable source of knowledge.

Regarding the topic of environment in the rest of TV programming, only regional public channels have their own spaces¹ whose aim is to disclose ecology, fauna and nature. This is besides the government channel, *La 2*. Most of these channels broadcast nature programs a few days a week. They are usually given low audience time frames and their shows include sensationalism. Radio is a highly popular media in Spain. It has some weekly air time that offers information on environmental issues. Radio programs also enhance participation through question and answer sections in which citizens can express their opinions, concerns and claims. This is especially so on regional channels (MMA 1999: 102). Government radio channels offer environment programs through sporadic magazines (in radio channel *SER*) and Sunday programs on hunting and fishing (in radio channel *COPE*).

There is no Spanish government newspaper with a specific, permanent section devoted to environmental information. This is in regards of generalizing press. Generally, though, this information is usually placed under Society (*El País* and *ABC*) or Science (*El Mundo*). Sometimes it is also included in newspapers under the topic of agriculture, meteorology, companies, and other.

Some daily newspapers include magazines as week-end attachments. These magazines may have articles on environment or supplements whose approach to environment is that of common interest and consumption. Topics usually include animal and plant world, nature outdoors proposals or ecotourism (Rico 2001: 2). The Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* started *Natura*, a Saturday supplement. This supplement is now monthly. Papers such as *El País* and *ABC* have monthly editions of *Tierra* and *Natura*, respectively.

Specialized environmental information started to get a foothold at the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties, through ecology and environment magazines, as well as tourism and nature sports magazines. They are for minorities and vary in frequency (MMA 1999: 103). In the last few years, some magazines discontinued due to their low profit rates. *Geo* is an environment specialized magazine that is still being published. There are disclosure magazines like *Muy Interesante* and *Quo* which normally publish long articles on environment written by specialists who are part of the editorial staff.

3. Climate Change Coverage

In July, 1900, *Alrededor del mundo* (*Around the World*), an informative magazine in Madrid, published an article in which the writer was wondering about the extreme temperatures in the last weeks. Following is the extract.

“Nowadays, meteorology cannot explain well this phenomenon. Neither can it explain different facts related to weather forecasts and constant alterations. Complex relationships among the weather elements are not known to us. Certainly, science may be able to explain this tomorrow. Still, the fact remains that today science cannot give a satisfactory answer (...)” (Vela, A. 1900. Quote from Fernández 2001: 413-414).

[1] *Tierra y mar*, in Canal Sur, Andalusian local channel; *TravelNotes & Documental* in ETB2, Basque local channel; *Medi ambient* in Punt2, Valencia local channel; *Documental* in TeleMadrid; *El escarabajo verde*, *La España sumergida* & *La Tierra vista desde el cielo*, in La 2, Spanish National TV; *Espacio protegido*, *Documentales de la Naturaleza*, *Lances & National Geographic*, in Canal 2, Andalusian local TV; *El medi ambient*, *Horizons*, *Curiositats del món animal* y *Planeta Tierra* in Canal 33, Catalanian TV; *Medi ambient* in TV3, Catalanian TV; *Natureza* in TVGA, Galician TV.

Obviously, at the time there was no awareness about climate change. Such terminology did not even exist. However, this magazine was throwing out, in advance, one of today's most disturbing environmental questions. This is largely due to messages from the media. According to Weart (2006: 183), decades later, the first news that there could be a climate alteration caused by man started to reach the public. They were mixed with the ozone layer deterioration and with the political process. It resulted in the Montreal Protocol, 1997, as an answer to this threat. This initiative by WWF was called *Planet Hour* and was born as an introduction to the UN Conference on Climate Change. It will be held during December in Copenhagen and 200 world leaders will try to reach a global agreement to continue with the Kyoto Protocol.

Media also echoed some events like the ex deputy president of the United States, Al Gore, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. This was due to his contribution towards the fight against climate change. One more instance is the announcement that Al Gore will publish a new book on global warming called *Our Decision*. And the report *The Era of Consequences: Foreign Policy and National Security Implications in Global² Climate Change*, in which experts warned about climate change dangers for the environment and for international peace and stability (*El Mundo*, 7.11.2007).

Media coverage on these events is proof that climate change is one of the problems whose magnitude and repercussions in the environment and in even world peace we started to be aware of thanks to media. In the United Kingdom, for instance, there are studies that confirm that information about climate change is mainly transmitted to the citizens by the mass media (Meira 2008: 55-6). There are also some investigations in the United States that show knowledge of science matters gained through the media is particularly obvious in the case of climate change (Wilson 2000: 201-17).

Spain, however, does not have specific data on this. The overview looks similar, although, based on the fact that Spanish media has been increasing the attention paid to climate change. Specifically, there has been an increase in news frequency and extension, editorials and opinion articles related to this. An increasingly diverse and plural approach is also noticeable. Moreover, it is moving from Social, Science or Environmental sections to National, International, Economy and even Society (Meira 2008: 58).

A Spanish national newspaper, *El País*, is a sample of this. Generally, it has continued an upward trend towards publishing information about climate change. It went from 75 pieces of information in 1999 to 878 in 2008.

Supposedly, the sudden increase of 2007, when this newspaper published 1 334 pieces of information, could have been caused by the granting of the Nobel Peace Prize to Al Gore for his contribution towards the fight against climate change. This fact agrees with Reig and Alcaide's study (2007: 322) on media hitch on some personalities. This is mentioned about the increase of environmental news in some Spanish newspapers related to the influence of information milestones caused by the American ex deputy president.

4. Difficulties in Media's Treatment of Climate Change

As noted, the Spanish media's trend to improve environmental issues, particularly climate change, is obvious but insufficient. There are no specific studies in Spain explaining why climate change is not receiving due climate coverage. Despite this, some significant causes may be deduced. These are the following.



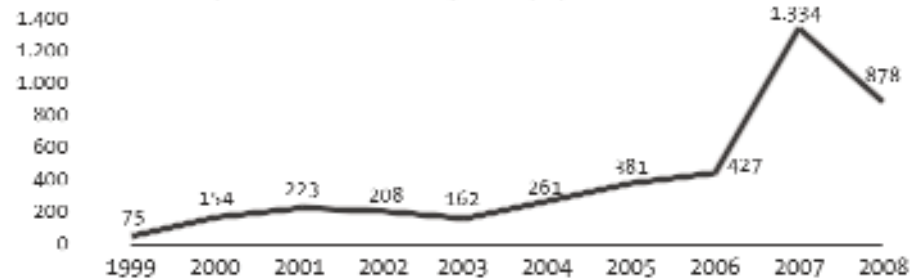
[2]Made by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Center for a New Security in the US. Published in November, 2007. It reminds issues such as the desertification of Darfur, in Africa, which caused some tension. Also, there could be floods in Bangladesh and 30 million people could be displaced in a country which is full of commotion and tends to Islamic extremism.



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4.1. Excessive protagonism given to disasters and conflicts

Figure 4. Pieces of information on climate change published in the daily newspaper *El País*



Data from www.elpais.es

Reig and Alcaide (2007: 322) prove in their already mentioned study that disasters and uncertainties triggered by them are a help to environmental journalism in Spain. This was the case of the *Prestige*, an oil vessel that sank off the Galician coast, North-West of Spain, in 2002. Media coverage set off alarm bells, getting public awareness. This resulted in an enormous social mobilization. People were worried about the environment. However, one of the main problems about environmental coverage is precisely that most pieces of news make reference to only great disasters such as fires, floods, oil spills, or chemical accidents. This adds to the fact that environment is reduced to sudden events, disasters or controversies. The real fact is that environmental topics are much more varied and are full of interesting questions for the environmentalists and for the average citizen.

Media's professionals are quite concerned about analyzing possible short term consequences of disasters. However, they do not make mention of facts whose effects may be visible in fifty years. The main reason for this sensationalistic trend may be that public demands attractive news. This is more so in TV, as the need for shocking images is timely as this is their bait for public attention (Parratt 2006: 21-2). Climate change does not initially cause so much damage as a disaster. However, they have more damaging effects on human beings and their environment on the long run. It is not easy, though, for journalists to change their journalistic routines in order to educate citizens on the risks, world implications and daily life implications for each individual.

4.2. Technical Complexity

More than a decade ago, Joaquín Fernández (1995: 40-41) condemned that "energy production is closely linked to some more serious ecological problems and is the key to truly face climate change challenges." He was talking about CO₂ emissions, which are responsible for the greenhouse effect and acid rain that is destroying the forests. He was also explaining the need for alternative energies and cleaner technologies and prioritizing saving programs plus energy efficiency in environmental policies in general. All this is part of a country's energy model. Getting to know these models in depth involves great technical skills for media professionals.





In order to create awareness about the causes for climate change, sources of greenhouse gases and possible solutions for these, the Spanish Ministry of Environment has a forum. Media's diffusion role and its difficulties are taken into account in this forum:

"Assuming that communicating climate change aspects can be reduced to selecting the "best scientific information" would be simplistic and somehow naïve (...) trying to reach the whole population effectively. In order to transmit CC science, there are some factors to evaluate. Rigor, legitimacy, relevance and quality of the information are important. However, it is necessary to consider socio-cultural backgrounds in which this information is to be displayed, received and recorded, audiences' profiles, media and broadcasting methods" (Meira 2008: 10-1).

Usually, messages on climate change are full of technicalities and explanations which are unsuitable for the average public. This is why it is essential for journalists to be trained to translate all the complex expressions into everyday language. According to Meira (2008: 104), this could be done transmitting information with attractive presentation, using simple and entertaining language, subtly displaying rigorous data and avoiding scientific language which is not to the general public's liking.

However, the media is not always willing to pay specialized personnel and usually chose non-specialized journalists who are willing to write in general about current topics. This is the reason why some researchers (Wilson 2000; Meira 2008) have observed that there are common errors from the terminology point of view. For instance, the terms, climate³ change and the greenhouse effect are used at random. It is important to remember that in the case of television, for example, lack of time to cast the news makes summaries necessary. Thus, the news nature could be changed. Time severity could also affect reliable resources. Some experts opt for not getting involved at all, as complex matters cannot be explain in short time periods (Montero 2007: 75).

4.3. Lack of proximity

A piece of information that appears in the media has first to become a piece of news. News must have newness and also be of public interest. In the case of scientific news, the public is often interested in those matters that affect them directly and that are near them. This is what Javier Gregori, who was awarded the Spanish National Prize for Environmental Journalism in 2003 (2004: 27-9) thinks. That is, the general public needs some information to help them link their everyday habits with global environmental threats.

One of the problems of climate change issues is that they usually do not fulfill the requirement of novelty. Novelty generally means agreeing or disagreeing with already known matters. Thus, it derives in coverage of controversies or different opinions.

Wilson (2000: 201-17) explains this when he says "science stage of competition." Finding the local bait in global issues means predicting small scale climate change repercussions. Due to its speculative nature, this matter could cause even more conflicts within the scientific community. Moreover, most of the information given by general media in Spain is reduced to "remote information," that is, news that arrives from far away sources such as NASA, *Nature* magazine, American universities). This kind of information is far from the recipients' environment, thus it makes it difficult for them to establish a relationship between their surroundings and environmental issues. "We are



[3] Climate Change's main symptom is global warming. However, there are other symptoms such as extreme temperature, floods, droughts, desertification, global melting or the widening of the ozone layer. All these influence human beings, animals and plants. Climate change is a consequence of the concentration of greenhouse effect gases, such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide. These come from aerosols, automobiles, fertilizers, deforestation and cattle. Climate change is used in general as the concept involves many different effects.





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all aware of the Amazon's deforestation. However, very few people are aware of public waste policies in their home towns," says Jose Maria Montero Sandoval (2007: 74). Montero (2007: 66) questions television documentaries, which is one of the main ways environmental information reaches the general public. He thinks these documentaries ignore local surroundings and place the problems in far away, exotic places. At times, they only describe natural phenomena or have a purely aesthetic approach. He quotes Delibes, a Spanish academic, "To what extent do beautiful documentaries about Australian sharks or Nepalese leopards help us recycle better and evaluate pros and cons of open air mines?"

4.4. *Climate Change Perceived as a Foreign Problem*

Lack of local approaches and the complexity of environmental problems and their long term effects result in citizen's false perception. Many citizens think climate change to be a foreign problem and do not feel responsible to make commitments. Metaphorically speaking, psychologists have used the term hypermetropia to name population's difficulty to understand how a global problem can affect at local and regional levels. This term summarizes the diluted perception of climate change threats in everyday life. It also makes reference to individual responsibilities in climate change causes and adopting palliative measures. Frequent advertizing messages do not help, as they often contradict warnings on climate change and the urge to do something about it at a personal level (Meira 2008: 22 and 84).

Past interviews showed that Spanish citizens were generally aware of environmental problems, particularly climate change. Their perception, though, was that of a foreign issue. This is caused by the feeling that individual efforts were insignificant due to the magnitude and complexity of such matters. Fortunately, recent studies (Meira 2008: 34) show that in spite of the fact that four out of ten citizens think that climate change is not an immediate threat, people are generally aware of this matter. In fact, during 2008 awareness has been clearly increasing.

4.5. *Insufficient Media Presence*

There have been a lot of discussions over the designing of environmental programs or sections and or the *ecologisation* of contents. Nowadays, the information model that is supported "allows entertainment and facilitates education" (Díaz León 2007: 196). Considering that climate change is related to different topics like economy, politics, society, culture and science, it looks like the best way to reach the population is through fighting on different fronts. This is besides the fact that environment may have specialized programs. In fact, if this type of information would only have its own programs, its target audience would probably be those who are already interested in environmental questions.

According to Montero, environment should try to "be part of daily media offerings, without limiting it to closed sections. This method allows for an abundance of topics and time frames, and so is a good system to naturally bring scientific questions into social debate" (2007: 67). He explains that the first step to follow would consist of avoiding concentrating almost all the environmental information in TV documentaries. The image of the nature that these programs offer should be complemented with news clips and articles, chronicles and informative interviews, which educate and create awareness.

4.6. Governments' Attitudes

Certainly, the media is responsible for improving climate change coverage. However, governments have a hand in encouraging media to take a more active role in social awareness. It took more than a decade for the international community to agree to the Kyoto Protocol. In Spain, these guidelines started to be considered only in the last few years. The Ministry of Environment admits that "progress in CC response policies have been particularly slow in the development of specific information, communication and education strategies" in contrast with other European countries (Meira 2008: 13-4).

In 2001 the Spanish Office for Climate Change (OECC) was created. Its powers included providing information through organizations and social agents to enhance activities to fight against climate change. Media was not mentioned at all. No representative from the media was invited to attend the latest *Seminar on Communication, Education and Participation in Climate Change*, held by this organization.

In December, 2007, progress was made. A working plan for the quinquennium 2008-12 was passed, including some recommendations such as informing the general public on climate change causes and measurements that can be taken to face this problem. The Ministry of Environment created an interactive permanent forum which directly referred to media. It is hoped that these references become regular and that governments involve the media in their initiatives more often.

5. Conclusion

Meira (2008: 13) explains quite rightly that climate change impact might become more obvious with time. This implies political and economic changes. The media's job would be to inform and even constrain, if necessary. At the social level, it implies that the population assumes important changes in daily habits and life-styles appropriate to the welfare of their culture. To this purpose, the population will need to receive information. Meira says that "a good part of medium and long-term success of environmental policies depends on the population's receptivity, support and participation. This is particularly relevant in rich countries." This information should already be available in schools and families during the early years. But above all, in the media, whose power to influence wide audiences is greater.

As noted, the media faces a lot of difficulties when it comes to the right environmental coverage. Some of them are inherent to the media and they will be solved by them. At the same time, governments will hopefully be more aware of how powerful an influence the media has in propagating information on climate change. This would surely result in greater public awareness.





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