

How exposure to media about the 2019 London April Rebellion affected the UK general public

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Brief summary

Method: In an internet experiment started on the evening of April 15th, 1500 participants viewed either: a BBC news report on the Rebellion, a Daily Mail article on the Rebellion, a direct social-media-style Rebel video report from a barricade, or no relevant media (control). Participants then answered questions about intentions and opinions. Due to representative sampling for age, gender and ethnicity, and weighting for education and political stance, the results can be seen as well-representative of the UK populations' reaction to such media.

Results and conclusions: BBC news and direct Rebel messaging caused increases in the public's belief in the necessity of civil disobedience. Further, direct Rebel messaging increased claimed intentions to participate in civil disobedience, and decreased satisfaction with Government action, although neither of these were influenced by the BBC report. The Daily Mail article had no detectable effects on these opinions and intentions. The effects of direct Rebel messaging apparently applied equally across the left-right political spectrum. This suggests that it may be possible for XR to reach the political centre (or even centre-right) more easily than might have been anticipated. None of the media increased concern about environmental issues, but this concern was already very high. There is some evidence that support for a Citizen's Assembly, though high overall, was slightly degraded by exposure to the Daily Mail report. XR should be careful with its messaging around Citizen's Assemblies.

Aim and method

This report describes an experiment in which participants were exposed to different forms of media that reported on the first day of the London April Rebellion, in order to test media effects on different opinions and intentions relevant to the crises.

Participants were tested between the evenings of Monday 15th April and Tuesday 16th April (between one-half and two days into the rebellion), with most tested early in this period. They were recruited over the internet, viewed media, and then answered key questions. ¼ of the sample was shown a [3 min BBC news clip](#) describing events primarily on Waterloo bridge at lunchtime of the 15th, ¼ read a [Daily Mail article](#) on the Rebellion, and ¼ viewed a 3.5 min [video of a Rebel](#) justifying the actions. A further ¼ were not informed about the action, for a comparison sample (they watched an [unrelated BBC news video](#) about Shakespeare's house in London).

The BBC and Daily Mail coverage were both relatively neutral. The Rebel video was a very compressed version of the Heading for Extinction line of argument, aimed (through choice of personal appearance and nuance of language) at the political centre.

All media used and the full questionnaire are available at <https://osf.io/tvm7q/files/>.

Representativeness of sample

The results presented are a reasonable estimate of how the UK population as a whole would have responded to such media. This is achieved by (1) a sample closely matched to the UK demographic for gender, age and ethnicity, and (2) weighting the results (giving more importance to under-represented groups) for education level and position on the left-right political spectrum. Generalising from a sample to a population involves a margin of error, and these error margins are presented in graphs. The margin of error takes into account the sample size and the fact that the results are weighted to be representative. Further details of method and statistics will be available in future reports.

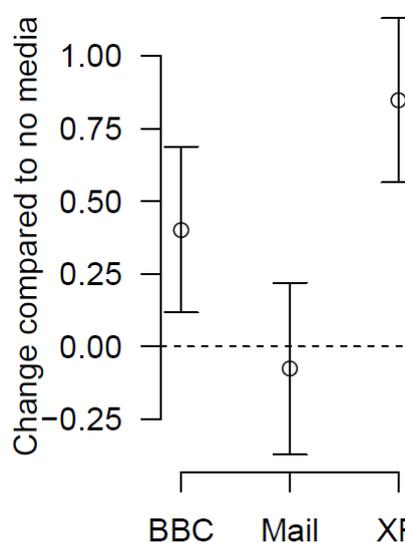
Any participants who expressed more than a small amount of knowledge of Extinction Rebellion prior to viewing any media were excluded from analysis. Because most measurements were taken after only one day of the April Rebellion, at which point most people in the UK were still unaware of it, this resulted in exclusion of only 4% of participants.

Results

“Do you think that disruptive civil disobedience is necessary to force Government action on climate change and ecological breakdown?”

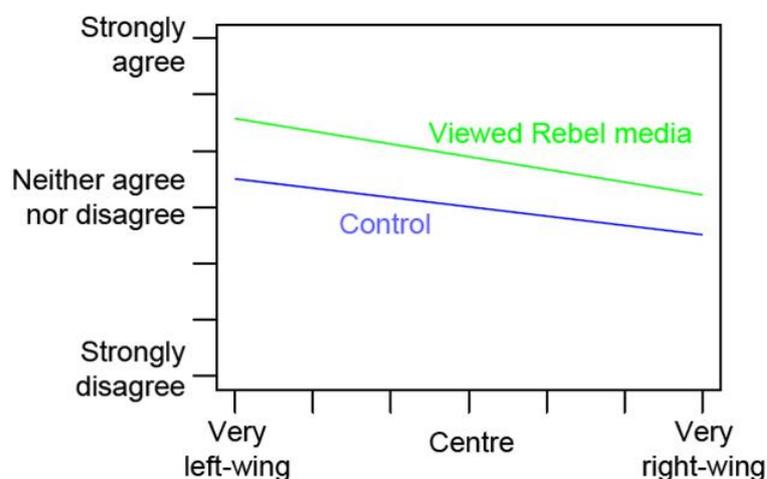
Response scale: Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (7)

The graph (right) does not show whether people tended to agree or disagree – it shows how much difference was made by viewing media about XR, compared to viewing media about Shakespeare’s house (control media). People who viewed the BBC report agree more than those who viewed control media, by about a third of a scale point. People who viewed the Rebel video agree more, by about three-quarters of a scale point, e.g. they shifted from “neither agree nor disagree” most of the way to “somewhat agree”. There is no evidence reading the Daily Mail article had any effect – a change of zero is inside the margin of error.



Conclusion: BBC coverage can be helpful for public support for XR methods. XR direct messaging can make a quite sizeable difference.

The graph to the right shows how responses to this question depend on the individual’s political stance. Left-wingers are appreciably more likely to agree that civil disobedience is necessary. However, it’s notable that there is no evidence that right-wingers are less susceptible to the rebel message: the two lines, showing the Rebel and Control conditions, are essentially parallel.



“Below is a list of actions that could lead society to take more action against climate change and other environmental problems. How likely are you personally to do each action within the next year?”

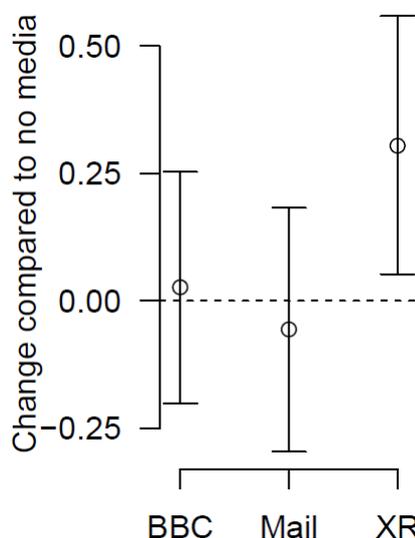
1. Sign a petition; 2. Write a letter to my MP; 3. Talk about the issues with friends or family; 4. Go on a protest march”

Response scale: Very unlikely (1) to Very likely (7)

In short, there is no evidence that exposure to any media about the rebellion altered individuals’ intentions to carry out any of these four behaviours.

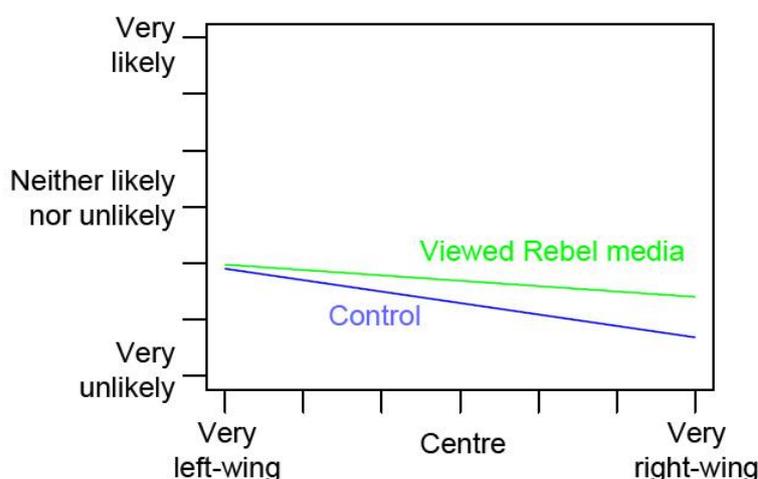
“5. Participate in peaceful and disruptive civil disobedience like blocking roads”

The graph to the right shows a small (around a third of a scale point) but statistically real increase in reported intention to engage in civil disobedience as a result of seeing the Rebel message from the barricades. The BBC and the Daily Mail have no effect.



Again, there is no evidence that the effect of exposure to Rebel media is different across the political spectrum. The graph to the right suggests that the effect may actually be greater for right-wingers, but this apparent difference is not greater than the margin of error.

Conclusion: Direct rebel messaging motivates people across the political spectrum to believe they will join in.



Concerns about climate and ecology

The Concerns variable is an average of four different items, answers to which are strongly correlated, so they are merged. *Response scale: Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (7).*

1. Climate change is one of the greatest threats facing humanity.
2. Ecological breakdown (for example species going extinct) is one of the greatest threats facing humanity.
3. I worry about the effects of climate change in my lifetime in this country.
4. By the end of this century, 1 in 5 people globally are likely to have died because of climate change.

There is no evidence that exposure to any type of media about the Rebellion influences people’s concerns about climate and ecology. This is possibly due to a ceiling effect: the average level of concern is already very high, at 5.3 on the 7 point scale. Most people tend to agree that by the end of this century, 1 in 5 people globally are likely to have died because of climate change.

Conclusion: It's hard to increase concern when concern is already high. It's notable, however, that high levels of concern self-evidently do not necessarily manifest as action – this relates to the phenomenon of implicatory denial.

Satisfaction with Government action

The Government satisfaction variable is an average of two different items, answers to which are strongly correlated, so they are merged. *Response scale: Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (7).*

1. The Government is doing a lot to tackle climate change.
2. The Government is doing a lot to tackle ecological breakdown (for example species going extinct).

The graph to the right indicates that exposure to Rebel media decreases satisfaction with Government action, but other media types have no detected effect.

Again, there was no evidence that this effect of exposure to Rebel media was dependent on individual political stance (graph omitted for brevity).

Conclusion: Rebels can make people across the population more dissatisfied with Government action.

“A Citizens Assembly is composed of about 100 randomly chosen members of the public, who are advised by experts, and given time to think, discuss, and decide action. A Citizens Assembly is similar to a big jury.

Do you think a Citizens Assembly would do a better job than UK Governments have done in tackling climate change and ecological breakdown?”

Response scale: Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (7).

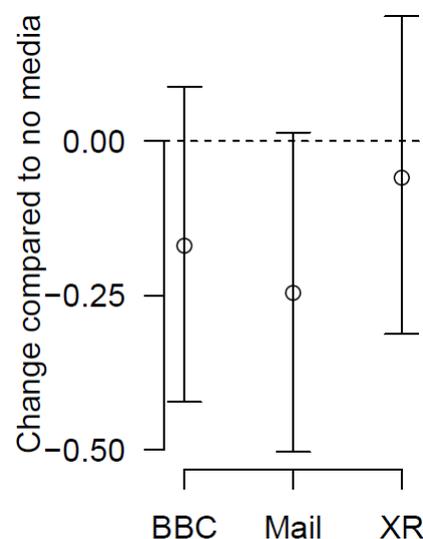
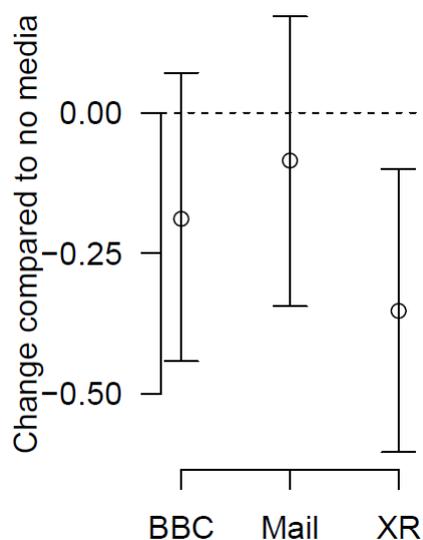
The graph to the right suggests that exposure to the different media types did not affect support for a Citizens Assembly. However, other analyses which are not weighted (and thus not shown here) indicate that at least for some sectors of the population, exposure to the Daily Mail article slightly reduced support for a Citizen's Assembly.

Overall, the public is very supportive of a Citizen's Assembly on climate (see previously released reports focused on this issue in detail).

Conclusions: XR needs to be careful with messaging around Citizen's Assemblies because for reasons that are not entirely clear, support can reduce when they are associated with XR.

Limitations and future reports

This study involves measurement immediately after exposure to media, with no way to determine longer-term influences, and exposure to only one media item after only one day of the April Rebellion. As the April Rebellion was approximately two weeks long and generated enough coverage that most people will have been repeatedly exposed, it's not clear how this



might alter the effects of exposure. These limitations will be addressed in a forthcoming report which analyses a different, longitudinal data set where 850 representative participants were questioned before, during, and after the April Rebellion. Existing longitudinal analysis from YouGov suggests the full scale of the April Rebellion did in fact influence public concern about the environment.

The current sample is representative only with regard to gender, age, ethnicity, education, and position on the left/right political spectrum. Other unmeasured variables such as region within the UK may play a role, although there is little reason to believe this would cause major changes to the results.

It's important to remember that the particular Rebel media chosen was a video deliberately aimed at the political centre, careful to avoid language or dress which might be perceived as eco-hippy in style, although in reality this is often experienced by the public as being part of XR messaging. Some key results here (that individual's political affiliations didn't alter the effect of the direct Rebel messaging) are unlikely to generalise to all XR messaging.

Although opinions expressed in surveys are often reliable measures, expressed intentions are often not a good indicator of actual future behaviour – this is a very important limitation of studies of this type.

Overall conclusions

Both a BBC news report and direct Rebel messaging caused increases in the public's belief in the necessity of civil disobedience. It's notable that the effects were appreciable after a single message exposure. Further, direct Rebel messaging increased claimed intentions to participate in civil disobedience, and decreased satisfaction with Government action. It is noteworthy that these effects apparently applied equally across the political spectrum. This result speaks to a frequently occurring debate between XR strategists – is it more important to use messaging designed to mobilise the most obvious potential support base (the green left), or to use messaging designed for a broader audience? The current results suggest that it may be possible for XR to reach the political centre (or even centre-right) more easily than might have been anticipated. Given the large size of those demographics in the population, XR messaging strategy could benefit from bearing this in mind.

Exposure to a Daily Mail article caused no effects on opinions or intentions – however, it should be noted that the article used was (by Daily Mail standards) moderately neutral and this does not mean that other articles in the right-wing press do not cause problems for XR.

Although support for a Citizen's Assembly is high (see previous report "Report on public opinion concerning Citizens Assemblies to tackle climate and ecological breakdown"), analyses of this data which are not demographically weighted (details available separately) indicate that exposure to XR as reported by the Daily Mail can reduce support for a Citizen's Assembly. The fact that weighting weakens this effect so that the effect is not outside the margin of error suggests that the effect is not large in the population as a whole, but is a factor amongst some demographics. XR should be aware that its association with the concept of a Citizens Assembly is not always positive. This could be, for example, because people don't fully understand the concept and imagine that it means undue influence from Rebels on policy. The first author of this report has personally observed confusion amongst Rebels themselves between Citizens Assemblies and the assemblies that Rebels use for discussion and decision making. It's recommended that the latter be called Rebel Assemblies rather than Peoples Assemblies, as Citizens and Peoples are arguable too easy to mix-up.

Addendum: analysis of effects of ethnicity added in response to request from media volunteer

Because non-white people are comparatively small minorities, there are statistical issues with focusing on ethnic sub-samples. Because of our overall fairly large sample, such an analysis can be cautiously attempted, focussing on one division only: white vs. ethnic minority (encompassing people who are ethnically black, Asian or other non-white, 210 people in our sample). The margins of error are inevitably large, but not too large to prevent all conclusions.

I haven't had time to do any graphs.

“Do you think that disruptive civil disobedience is necessary to force Government action on climate change and ecological breakdown?”

Minorities are more likely to agree, by about three-quarters of a scale point (roughly the same difference as exposure to the Rebel message makes). The margin of error for the effect is very large – the effect could in fact be very small or as large as 1.4 scale points – but by conventional scientific standards, the effect is real.

There is no evidence that effects of media exposure on this variable depend on ethnicity.

“How likely are you personally ... participate in peaceful and disruptive civil disobedience like blocking roads?”

There is no evidence of an ethnicity difference (the trend, which is probably due to chance, is for minorities to report being slightly *more* likely.

It's difficult to explain without going into statistical details, but there *might* be some evidence that reading the Daily Mail article makes ethnic minorities less likely to report they are likely to do this. It's notable that the Daily Mail includes a picture that is a sea of white faces.

(Some detail on why I'm hedging: all the analyses so far have been done in two different ways, for added robustness, and the methods have always converged on the same results. This analysis is the first time that one method supports the existence of an effect and the other does not, probably due to the small sample of ethnic minorities.)

Concerns about climate and ecology

Satisfaction with Government action

Support for Citizens assembly

For all these variables, there is no evidence for differences between white and minority members of the public, and no evidence they respond differently to media exposure. However, it should be remembered that appreciable effects could exist, undetected due to the large margin of error due to the small sample of ethnic minorities.