Extreme weather events are happening at an increased frequency. While the focus is often on heat extremes, severe cold snaps also have devastating consequences. The United States experienced a major cold snap in early 2021, with daily highs and lows far below average. People turn to news reporting to deal with extreme weather events. However, media can amplify misinformation. Fox News’ Tucker Carlson went on-air February 15, 2021, with a segment “The great Texas catastrophe is headed your way” blaming renewable energy. The failure of coal, natural gas and nuclear power were more significant causes of the blackouts than wind energy.

I address if, and how, U.S. mainstream press and broadcast outlets gave issue attention to misinformation about the role of wind turbines during the 2021 Texas blackouts. I use climate change as a comparison issue. I examined the volume of English language news coverage from February 7 to March 20, 2021 and purposively sampled media coverage from U.S. print and broadcast news sources. I compare elite, climate-specialist outlets to non-climate specialist ones. Findings demonstrate Fox News can serve as a major influencer on media attention to misleading claims about wind energy.

RESULTS

Climate-specialist media outlets were significantly more likely to give issue attention to frozen wind turbines than non-climate specialist ones (see Table 1). Results for press versus broadcast frozen wind turbine issue attention were non-significant (not shown). For climate change issue attention, chi-square tests of independence showed significant differences between press and broadcast, as well as for climate-specialist versus non-specialist outlets (only climate-specialist data shown).

CONCLUSIONS

These findings demonstrate Fox News served as a major influencer on overall media attention during the Texas power crisis by amplifying misleading claims about wind power with implications for U.S. climate policy. The extent to which media devoted attention to misinformation about wind energy during the height of the blackouts distracted public attention from the on-the-ground humanitarian crisis, during which more than 100 people died from the cold.