



SHIFTING THE CLIMATE CONVERSATION: FROM FEAR TO HOPE

A GUIDE FOR COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

When the final report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on the state of climate action was released in March 2023, it inspired the UN Secretary General to comment that avoiding a calamitous three-degree rise in global temperatures would require us to do "everything, everywhere all at once."

That includes journalists who hold incredible power to sway public opinion and drive action. It also extends to communications professionals who must have a heightened duty of care to ensure hype is removed from anything to do with climate change.

This research was designed to help communications professionals understand the media environment. Through a deeper and data-led understanding of how climate change is currently discussed in news across the globe, we have identified challenges in the current discourse, and opportunities to contribute productively.

The result is six key tenets that will help navigate a communications channel that is critical if we want to accelerate climate action.



RULES OF THE ROAD

Communicators need to show real-world examples of how business or government initiatives contribute positively to reducing emissions.

NGOs and climate bodies need to reconsider the way they present information, using less fearful language.

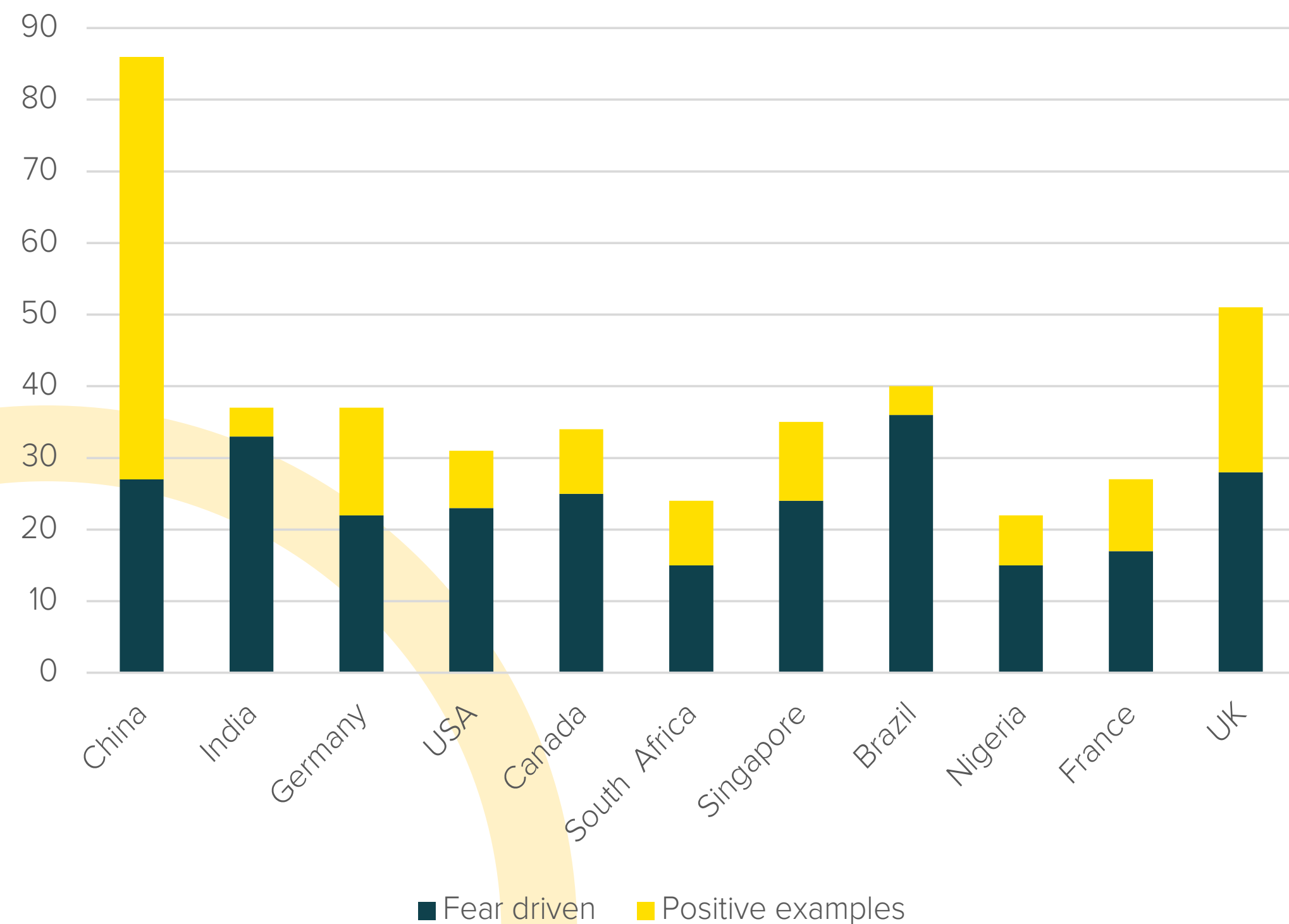
Local impact often counts for much more than the authority that comes with global organisations.

Businesses should not shy away from telling their stories but it should be done with humility and without spin.

Find your climate heroes and put them front and centre of your communication.

Careful media planning is critical to communicating successfully and avoiding potential media bias.

LESS DOOM; MORE POSITIVITY



Media are nearly twice as likely to take a fear-driven approach than to call out positive examples. Less than 7% of coverage provides real-world examples of what can be done to reduce pollution while creating a sense of fear runs through nearly 12% of articles (11.6%).

The imbalance is particularly acute in India and Brazil where fear-based reporting outweighs positive examples by a factor of eight and nine respectively.

The exception is China where the ratio is reversed and nearly a quarter (23.6%) of articles carry positive examples, though this is largely driven by promotion of national and local government initiatives.

Takeaway: communicators need to wind in the doom and show real-world examples of how business or government initiatives contribute positively to emissions reductions. The consequence of doom-mongering – demonstrated by Hastings et al and Obach – is a potential decline in trust and withdrawal from action.

— NGOS NEED TO CHANGE TONE

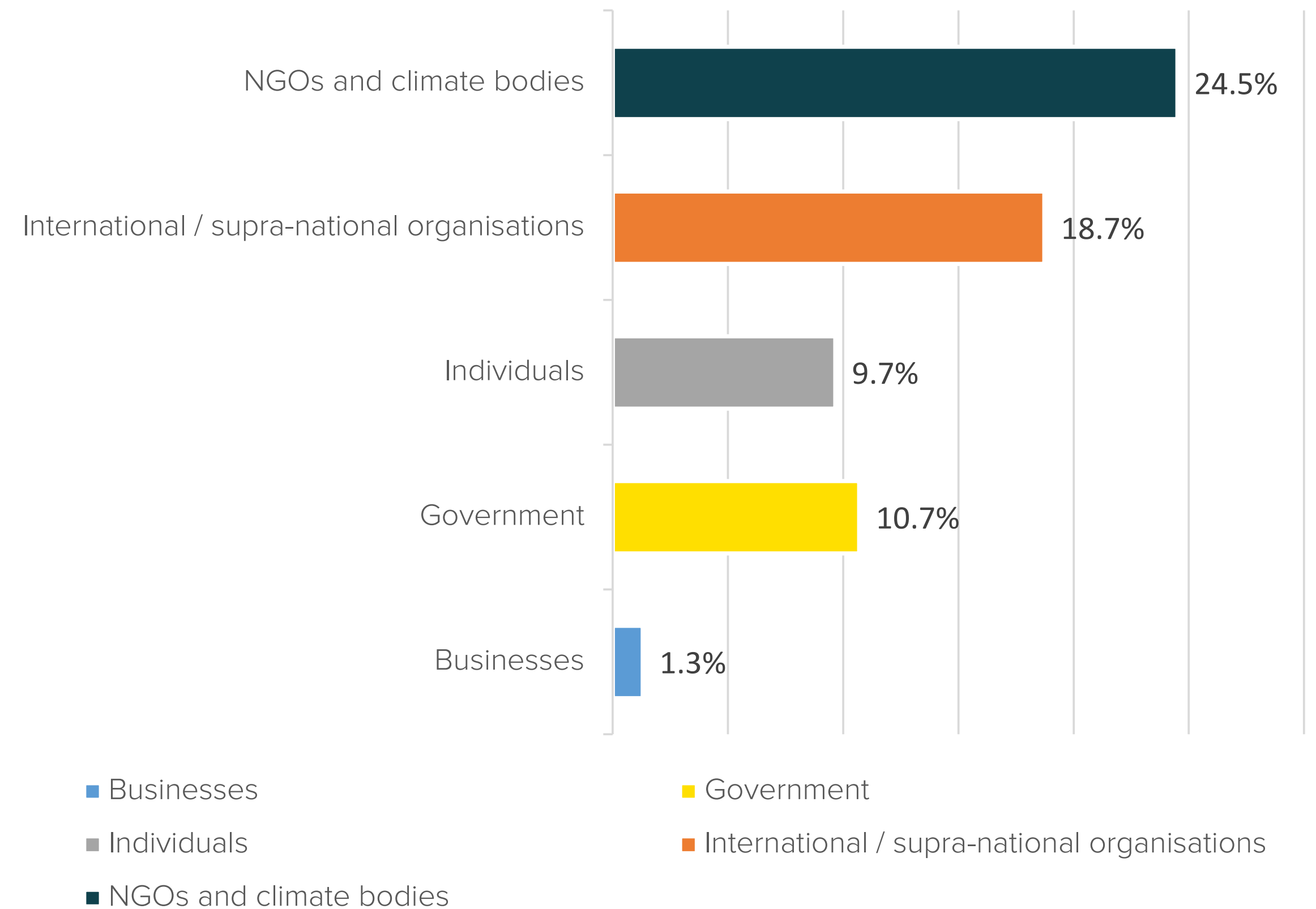
Negativity seems to be rife among NGOs, climate bodies and international / supra-national organisations such as the UN.

Despite accounting for less than one-third (32%) of all coverage, these two organisation types make up over half (51%) of all news articles with a fear-driven message.

That is primarily because of the kind of data for which they are responsible, and the reports they produce.

Takeaway: NGOs and climate bodies need to reconsider the way they present information. It's important to represent data accurately but using less fearful language may help increase impact

Fear-driven articles by organisation type



— THINK LOCAL

Media coverage of national and local government's climate action is, by a large distance, the single biggest topic of media coverage, making up nearly two-thirds of all the coverage analysed (64.8%).

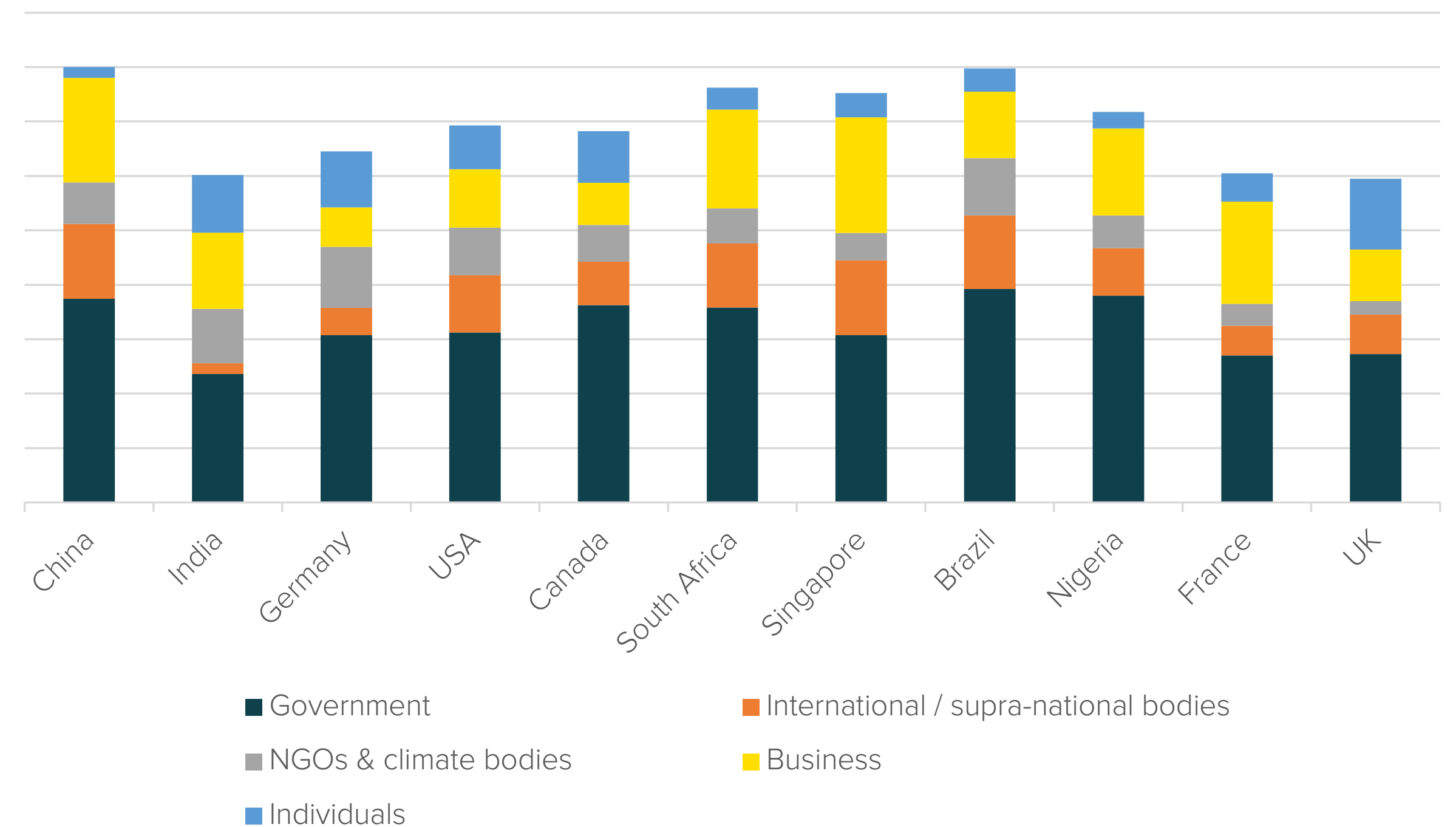
The next nearest category is business, which accounts for a little under three in ten articles (28.3%).

Climate change is clearly a global issue and needs global coordination and cooperation but the media coverage reflects a basic truth: local impact is more interesting than activity in other countries.

This is particularly true for UK, France and India. By contrast, media in China, South Africa, Singapore and Brazil are much more willing to write about global initiatives.

Takeaway: adapt your story to take into account media preferences for local impact vs. the authority that comes with global organisations.

Media articles by organisation type



— SCEPTICISM OF BUSINESSES IS NOT RIFE

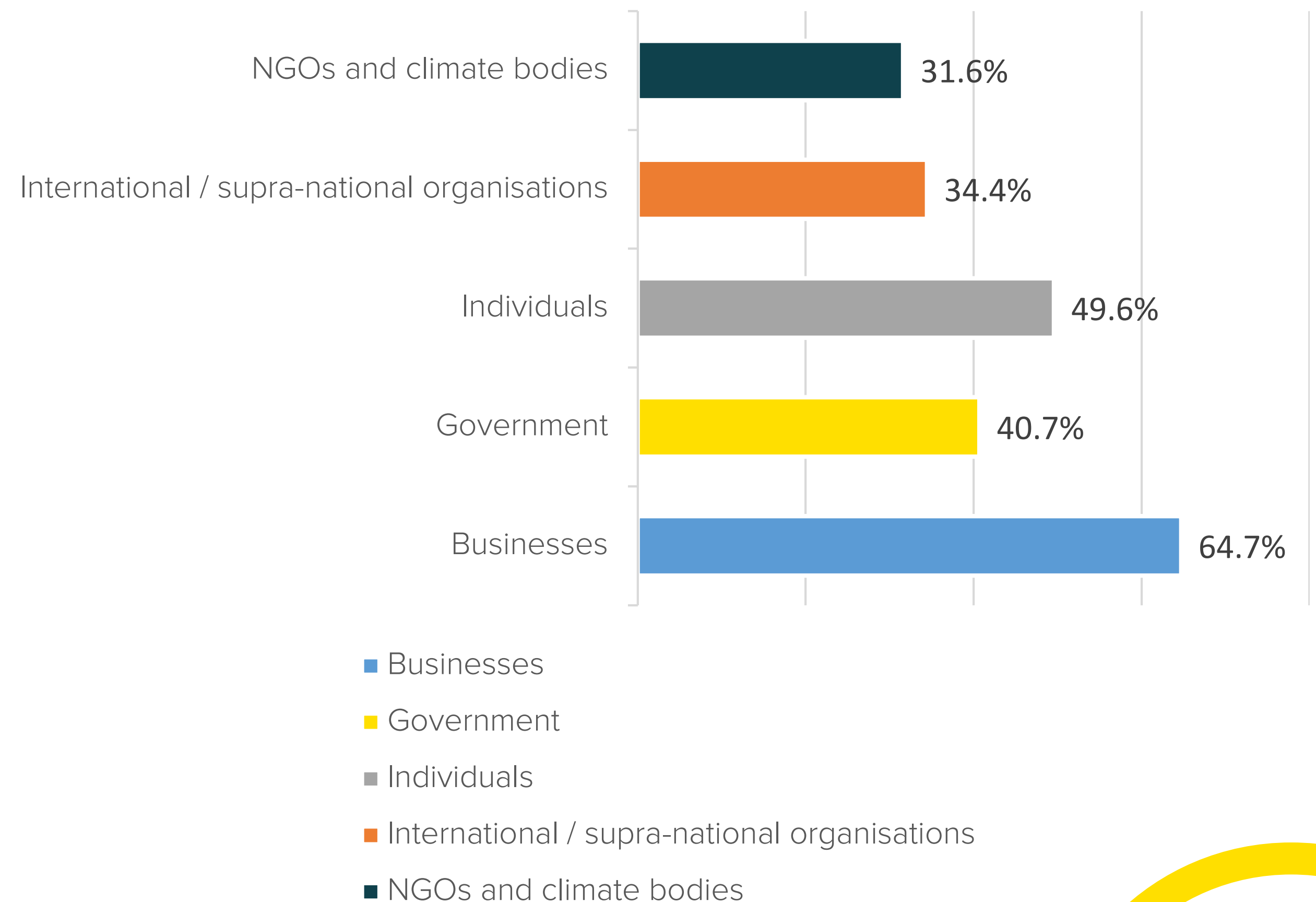
Businesses could be forgiven for thinking that talking about climate change is open season for the media. Our research shows this is not the case; nearly two-thirds (64.7%) of media coverage praises what businesses are doing, with less than 1 in 10 articles (7.6%) carrying criticism.

It is also noticeable that many of the positive stories revolve around smaller brands rather than the global behemoths, showing you do not have to be a multi-national to create positive coverage of climate change initiatives.

This should not be a catalyst for businesses to bombard media with climate stories because – as greenwashing examples become more commonplace – media may be inspired to dig beyond the press release.

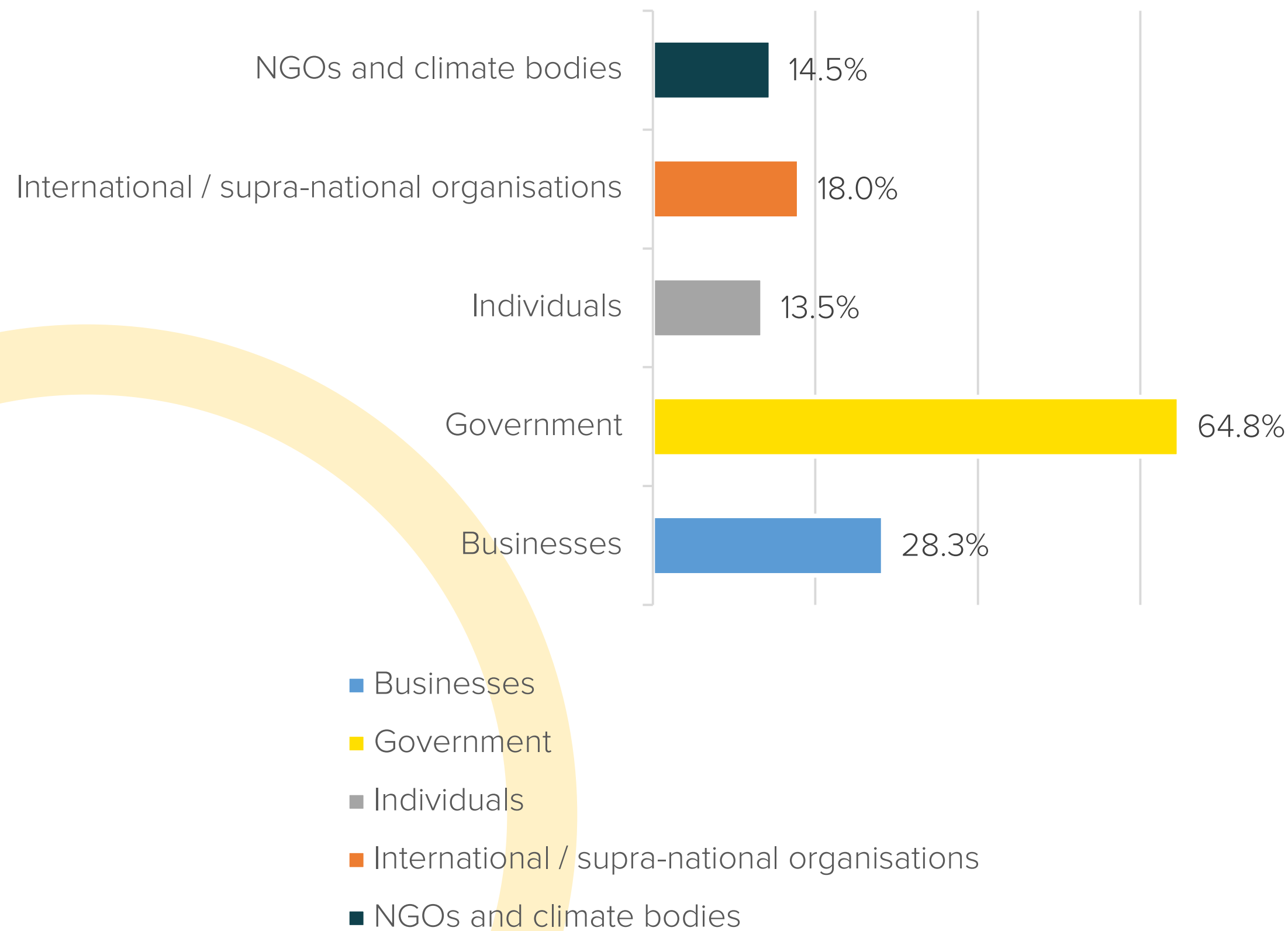
Takeaway: businesses should not shy away from telling their stories but it should be done with humility and without spin.

Praise of action by organisation type



— MAKE IT PERSONAL

Articles by organisation type

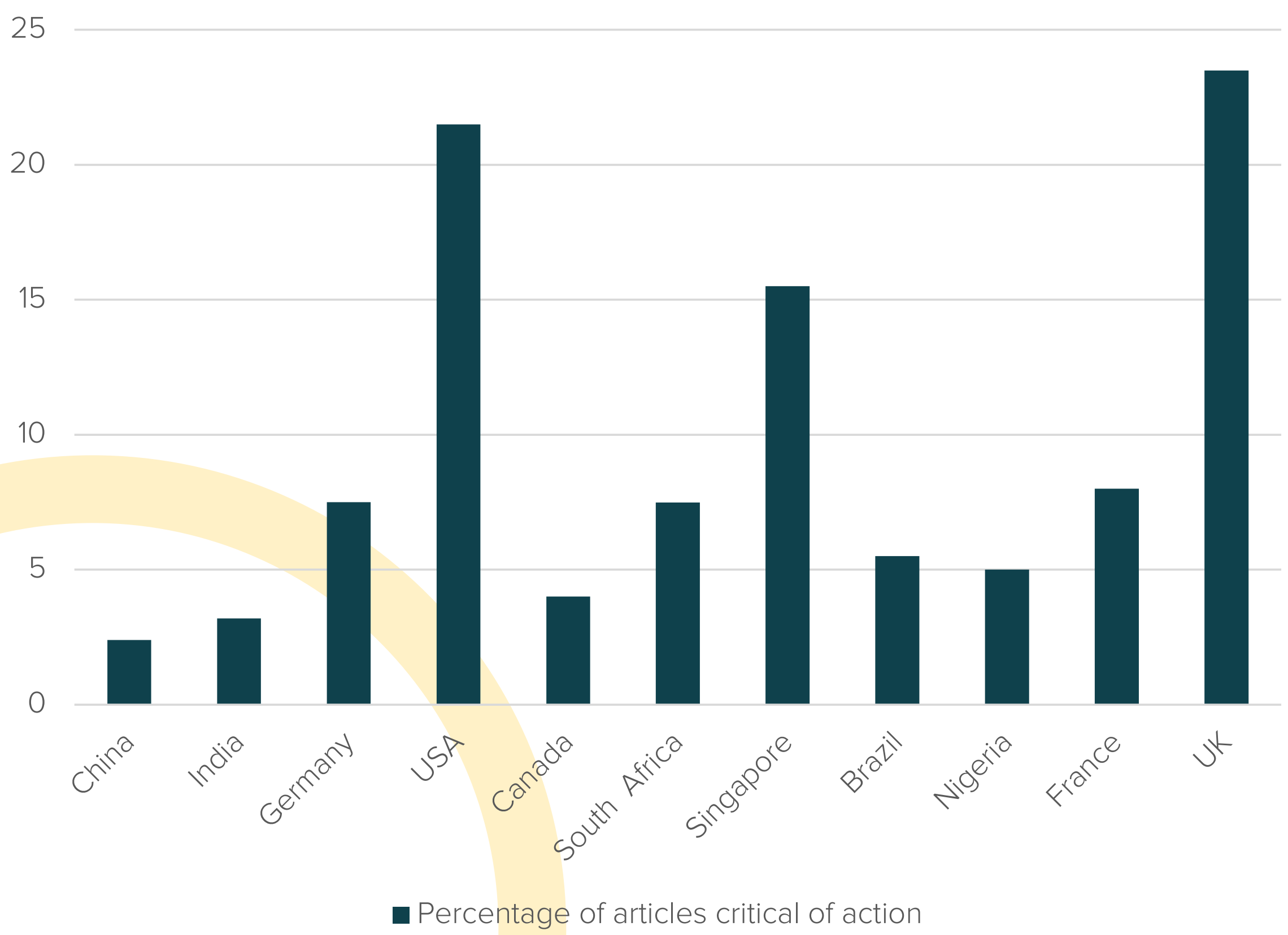


Stories about individuals and their role in climate change occupy the least number of media articles with just over one in ten (13.5%) focusing on people.

However, these kinds of stories have an outsized ability to create optimism with 14% - more than twice as many as the next nearest organisation type – carrying strong, positive examples of how individuals and individual action can make a difference.

Takeaway: as with all stories, the best are built around people. Find your climate heroes and put them front and centre of your communication.

CLIMATE DENIAL IS (ALMOST) NON-EXISTENT



Out of nearly 2300 articles, we only found one that openly denied climate change was real. However, there are outlets in some markets which are openly critical of government action, pegging the idea to increased costs to taxpayers.

UK media tend to be most negative about action being taken with nearly a quarter of all articles (23.5%) carrying criticism of action. The US is close behind with 21.5% of articles. In both countries, this negativity tends to be concentrated in a few outlets.

By contrast, media in China, India and Canada are very selective in their criticisms.

Takeaway: careful media planning is critical to communicating successfully and avoiding potential media bias.

HOW WE DID IT

AMERICAS
USA, Canada, Brazil

AFRICA
South Africa, Nigeria

ASIA
China, India,
Singapore

EUROPE:
UK, France, Germany

2300 ARTICLES
45 PUBLICATIONS
11 COUNTRIES

Articles from June to August 2023 were examined and each had to feature one of 40 search terms in the headline or opening paragraph (e.g. “climate change”, “net zero”, “carbon emissions”, etc.) to ensure it was substantially about climate change.

Each article was tagged with two types of attributes

Category / Type: The main entity or subject of a news article (i.e. type of organisation or individual). The full set of tags were: International / Supra-governmental Policy; NGOs & Climate Bodies; Government Policy; Business Activity; or Individual Behaviour

Sentiment: The Sentiment in the news article directed towards the action or inaction being taken by the subject. This was not a value judgement of “good/bad” sentiment, but instead whether the article itself Supported or Critiqued a given Action or Inaction that was related to addressing climate change. The full set of tags were: Neutral; Critique of Action; Critique of Inaction; Praise of Action; or Praise of Inaction

In addition to the two main tags, where a news article had a “Call to Action / Sharing Action” related to climate change, we also tagged whether the example or action shared and encouraged was “Fear Driven” or “Positive Example” - i.e. whether the action example discussed was an example of a specific action to address climate change or a call to action sharing news of the consequences or current negative impacts of climate change.

Never has it been more important to tell climate stories effectively. And yet...communications professionals find themselves caught between wanting to celebrate progress and being accused of greenwashing.

This report shows that there are six golden rules to creating positive media coverage around sustainability, whatever you are doing.

For a detailed conversation about how you can create and deliver the stories that will take your organisation forward – and how you measure your effectiveness – please get in touch.

**WHAT
NEXT?**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:
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REPUTATION WORKS

With a focus on sustainability, Reputation Works helps businesses of all sizes find and tell their stories so they can make an impact in the world around them.

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