# A Topography of Climate Change Research

Max Callaghan[1,2]

[1]Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change, Torgauer Straße, 10829 Berlin, Germany
[2]School of Earth and Environment, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, United Kingdom

Draft current November 27, 2018

**The massive expansion of scientific literature on climate change challenges the Intergovenmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s ability to assess the science according to its objectives. Moreover, the number and variety of papers hinders researchers of the science-policy interface from making objective judgements about those IPCC assessments. In this paper, we present a novel application of a machine-reading approach to model the topical content of papers on climate change. This dynamic topic model provides the basis for a *topography* of climate change literature. The thematic development of the field is outlined and used to inform an analysis of the topics which are better and less well covered by IPCC reports.**

**To deal with the wicked problem of climate change, international policy-makers need the IPCC. The IPCC as map-makers.**

The IPCC sees its role as to "assess on a comprehensive, objective, open and transparent basis the scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant to [...] climate change" [1]. Climate science is so broad, multi-disciplinary, and laden with uncertainties and values, that the role of the IPCC as assessment maker is vitally important to developing evidence-based international climate policy. Making maps [2]

**The task of the IPCC has become much more difficult with big literature**

Further, it has been pointed out that, in the age of "big literature", providing assessments that are comprehensive, objective and transparent has become much more difficult [3].

When IPCC's citations constitute an ever-decreasing proportion of the totality of science on climate change, questions about the map that the IPCC reports produce become more pressing:

- Is the map up to date? Is it complete? Is the perspective representative?

**The IPCC, its reports and processes have been the object of study before. These are also hampered by problems of scale though**

Various researchers have attempted to do empirical research on the assessment reports, and processes of inter. alia. the IPCC [4] [5] [**?** ] [6].

Policy makers, when asked about their interactions with the IPCC call for a greater focus on solutions [7]

These studies are similarly challenged by the the size of the literature. Traditional bibliometric techniques are insufficient.

**Some literature exists on bibliometrics and climate change, but tends not to deal with text**

Bibliometrics e.g. [8] [9]

Text based approaches are usually of a smaller scope [10] or methodological contributions [11]

**The scale of the problem in context**

The scale of the challenge is depicted in figure **??**. Less than two thousand documents relevant to climate change were published before the first assessment report (see Methods for data, exclusions and processing). These documents contained 3,528 unique terms, each of which was used on average in 0.49% of documents. In the three complete years since the publication of AR5, 128,357 documents have been published, containing 86,419 unique terms, used on average in 0.12% of documents. To put this into context, the 1,189 chapters of the Bible contain a vocabulary of 11,977 unique words. Put another way, the 236,634 publications published in AR5 and AR6 are significantly larger than the 178,118 publications recorded in the first volume of the 'Catalogue of Scientific Papers', compiled by the Royal Society to record the entirety of scientific output from 1800 to 1863 [12]

**Machine reading to deal with scale problems in the making and assessing of maps**

Clearly, if the IPCC is to continue producing comprehensive assessments, it has to engage in machine-reading in order to remain anchored to the wider literature. Without such an approach, it becomes harder to justify which ever-diminishing proportion of the wider literature is included

| | AR1 | AR2 | AR3 | AR4 | AR5 | AR6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Documents** | 625 | 7623 | 16395 | 34510 | 117758 | 128266 |
| **Words** | 1380 | 12409 | 20453 | 32644 | 67064 | 74196 |
| **New words** | change (296) | loss (552) | downscaling (197) | sres (217) | biochar (1752) | mmms (192) |
| | climate (262) | efficiency (515) | degreesc (145) | petm (95) | redd (1058) | c3n4 (132) |
| | model (168) | mol (439) | ncep (130) | amf (87) | cmip5 (656) | cop21 (107) |
| | effect (160) | ambient (417) | otcs (87) | sf5cf3 (81) | cmip3 (569) | cmip6 (104) |
| | co2 (156) | coal (404) | nee (87) | cwd (74) | wrf (334) | zika (75) |
| | atmospheric (152) | photosynthetic (393) | fco (80) | embankment (72) | mofs (288) | brgdgts (71) |
| | climatic (133) | concern (381) | hadcm2 (78) | aod (69) | sdm (283) | twitter (68) |
| | global (131) | chamber (353) | dtr (75) | clc (69) | gosat (281) | jing (66) |

Table 1: Growth in climate change literature

in assessments. Similarly, it becomes harder to criticise, with quantitatively evidenced claims, the outcomes of assessment processes.

**Dimension reduction makes possible the description in reduced form, and with less human bias, of unmanageably large datasets**

[13] [14]

This reduced form description makes comparisons more useful, when cutting the dataset.

**Machine reading is a supplement to assessment-making and not free from bias; a topography is not a map**

Machine reading approaches can of course not replace the task of human assessment-making. The contribution that could be made, though, is to pre-process the literature, producing a topographical map, used to navigate the literature while producing a more detailed assessment with human judgement.[[]] In fact this happens already - when IPCC authors search for literature on a topic, the results which appear on the search engine they use will be subject to algorithms based on the processing of millions of records of article text and metadata. This can be done in a much more systematic way when scientists perform directed analyses of the literature at scale.

**This study's contribution. Overarching themes, structure of the literature, development, relation to IPCC**

This study demonstrates how dynamic topic modelling can be used to gain an overview of an otherwise unmanageably large body of literature. This overview, or topography, describes the

Figure 1: A map of the literature on climate change. Document positions are obtained by reducing the topic scores to two dimensions via t-SNE Documents are coloured by working group citations (top) and web of science discipline category (bottom). See SI table for further description

Figure 2: The evolution of the landscape of climate change literature

thematic development of the climate change literature and, in a novelly systematic way, examines how comprehensively the IPCC has been able to engage with it. In pulling together strands from text-mining, bibliometrics, and the study of science and policy, this study advances our understanding of the literature on climate change and the role of the IPCC in communicating this to policy makers.

# Results

**A topographical map of climate change documents shows the broad structure of climate change literature**

Topics cut across both disciplinary, and working group lines - but disciplinary and working group structure remains visible in the map.

**The topic-document correlation network is densest in AR2 and 3 but becomes more fragmented over time**

(partly: Model less good at describing literature later on)

**Working groups are clustered together [dynamics], with topics like [x] containing documents across working groups and topics like [y] important network nodes**

**Sustainability has been an increasingly important theme in an overarching topic about environmental sciences**

(compare to biochar, which is much more recent)

Figure 3: The development of the topic-document correlation network over IPCC assessment periods.

| title | top words | top docs | share |
|---|---|---|---|
| climat, chang, impact | [climat, chang, impact, respons, futur, effect, shift, sensit, affect, may] | Climate oscillations and changes over Russia; World Regionalization of Climate Change (1961-2010) | 2.73% |
| soil, moistur, microbi | [soil, moistur, microbi, organ, respir, content, miner, depth, matter, efflux] | PARTITIONING OF SOIL RESPIRATION IN A FIRST ROTATION BEECH PLANTATION; Responses of soil respiration to N fertilization in a loamy soil under maize cultivation | 2.73% |
| emiss, reduct, reduc | [emiss, reduct, reduc, greenhous, factor, total, estim, inventori, nox, measur] | China's CH4 and CO2 emissions: Bottom-up estimation and comparative analysis; Monitoring total emissions from industrial installations | 2.21% |
| carbon, dioxid, sequestr | [carbon, dioxid, sequestr, sink, organ, cycl, storag, stock, terrestri, atmospher] | Interpreting carbon-isotope excursions: carbonates and organic matter; PARTICULATE FLUXES OF CARBONATE AND ORGANIC-CARBON IN THE OCEAN - IS THE MARINE BIOLOGICAL-ACTIVITY WORKING AS A SINK OF THE ATMOSPHERIC CARBON | 1.74% |
| temperatur, air, mean | [temperatur, air, mean, surfac, minimum, maximum, daili, increas, effect, degreesc] | Observed changes in shallow soil temperatures in Northeast China, 1960-2007; Beyond the Mean: Biological Impacts of Cryptic Temperature Change | 1.71% |
| record, dure, glacial | [record, dure, glacial, reconstruct, last, period, holocen, event, late, core] | HIGH-RESOLUTION CLIMATE RECORDS FROM THE NORTH-ATLANTIC DURING THE LAST INTERGLACIAL; HIGH-RESOLUTION CLIMATIC INFORMATION FROM SHORT FIRN CORES, WESTERN DRONNING MAUD LAND, ANTARCTICA | 1.7% |
| speci, distribut, rang | [speci, distribut, rang, rich, invas, nich, predict, extinct, shift, abund] | Northward range extensions of some mesopelagic fishes in the Northeastern Atlantic; Natural occurrence and backwater infection of C-4 plants in the vegetation of the Yangtze hydropower Three Gorges Project region | 1.7% |
| increas, concentr, decreas | [increas, concentr, decreas, effect, atmospher, doc, result, organ, nutrient, may] | TERRESTRIAL HIGHER-PLANT RESPONSE TO INCREASING ATMOSPHERIC [CO2] IN RELATION TO THE GLOBAL CARBON-CYCLE; Hydrological response to climate change in the Black Hills of South Dakota, USA | 1.61% |
| forest, tropic, stand | [forest, tropic, stand, deforest, disturb, stock, boreal, redd, harvest, wood] | Spatially explicit estimates and temporal changes of forest tree biomass in a typical department of forest management, Turkey; Analysis of the changes in forest ecosystem functions, structure and composition in the Black Sea region of Turkey | 1.56% |
| energi, renew, consumpt | [energi, renew, consumpt, effici, demand, save, sector, sourc, industri, use] | Energy issues and energy priorities; Energy efficiency and CO2 emissions in Swedish manufacturing industries | 1.56% |

Table 2: Top 10 topics in climate change literature

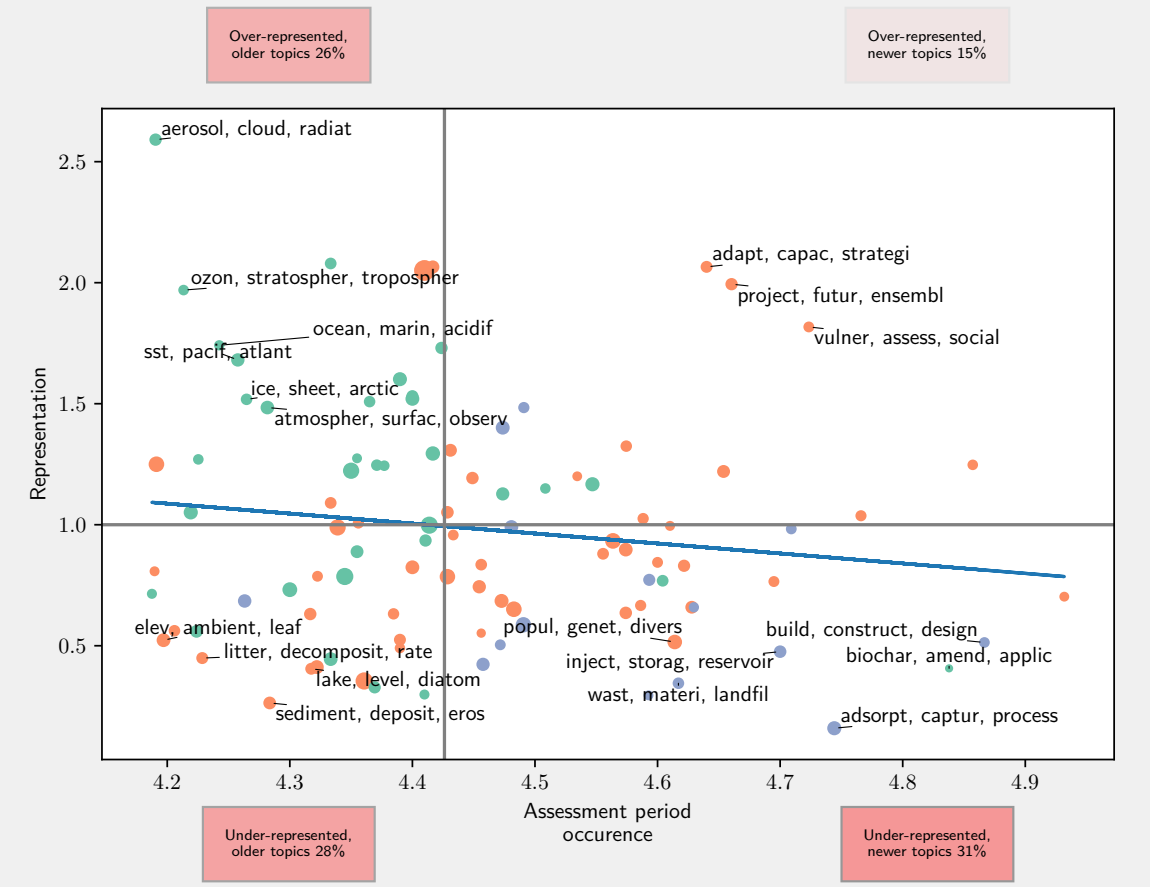


Figure 4: Representation and newness of dynamic topics

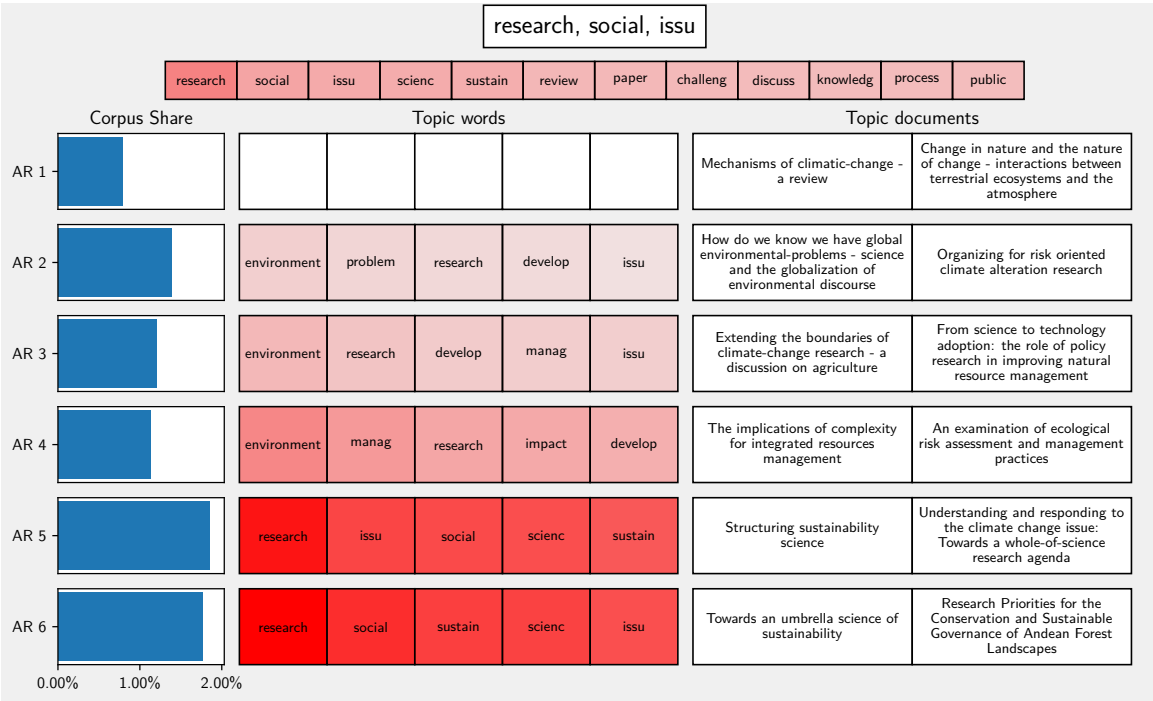


Figure 5: Word and document development of the "Research" dynamic topic

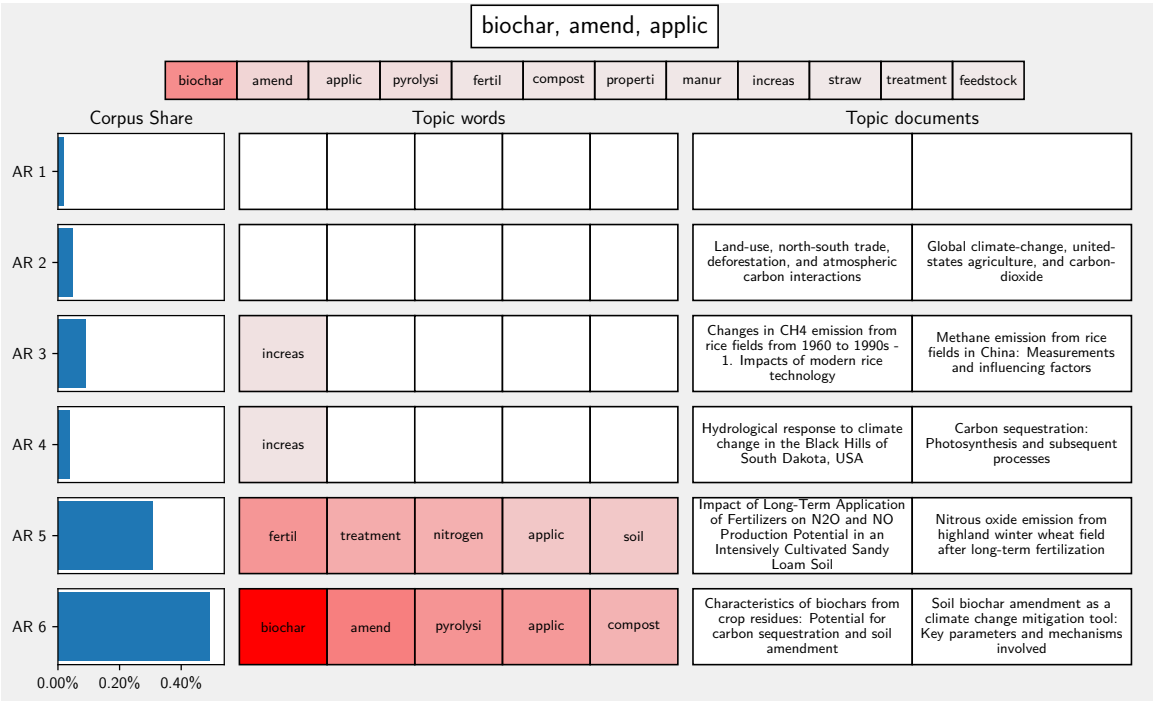


Figure 6: SI Word and document development of the “Biochar” dynamic topic

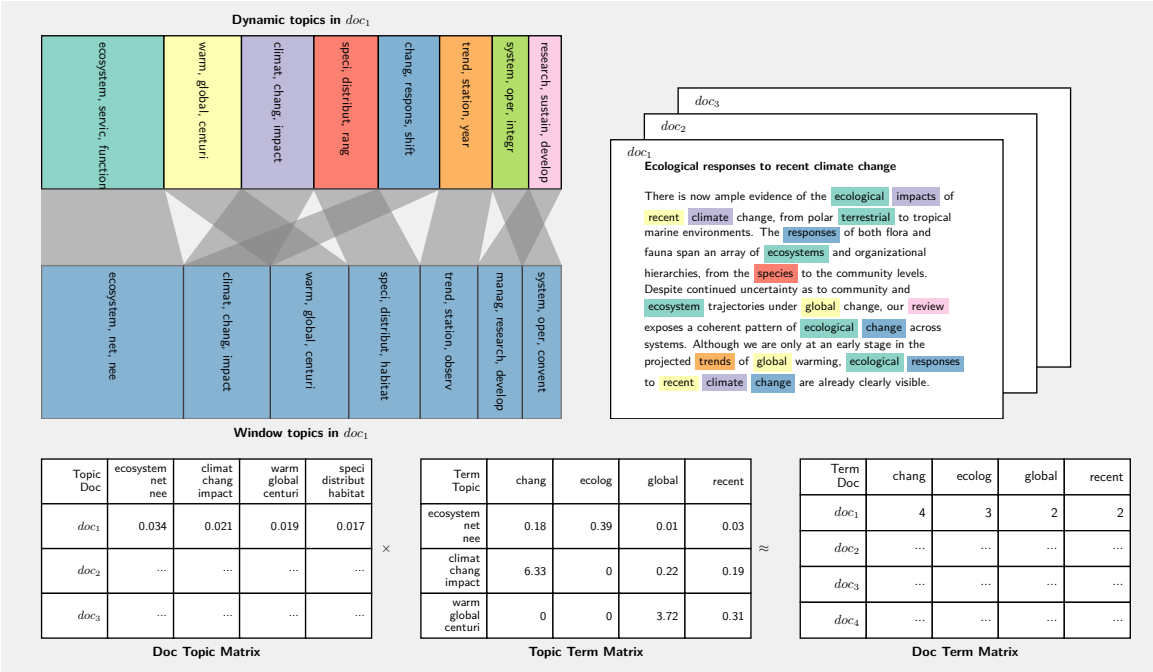


Figure 7: SI Topic make up of a single document

**Physical science topics tend to be the oldest, and the most well represented topics**

**Adaptation and impact studies have seen a lot of growth but are well represented in IPCC reports**

**New topics around negative emissions and urban form are very recent and not well represented in IPCC reports.**

Negative emissions in special report on 1.5, demand side chapter in AR6

# Discussion

**Solutions, policies and science**

What do policy-makers mean when they ask for more solutions

**Perfect representation is not necessarily desirable, but the skewedness should be known**

There may be good reasons for a topic to be less prominent in IPCC discussions than in the wider scientific literature, and these reasons can only be understood and acted upon by humans, not by machine-reading. Nevertheless, it is desirable that assessment makers are aware of the relationship

# Methods

## Data

# List of Figures

# References

[1] IPCC. Principles governing IPCC work, 2013.

[2] Ottmar Edenhofer and Martin Kowarsch. Cartography of pathways: A new model for environmental policy assessments. *Environmental Science and Policy*, 51:56–64, 2015.

[3] Jan C. Minx, Max Callaghan, William F. Lamb, Jennifer Garard, and Ottmar Edenhofer. Learning about climate change solutions in the IPCC and beyond. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 2017.

[4] Jason Jabbour and Christian Flachsland. 40 years of global environmental assessments: A retrospective analysis. *Environmental Science and Policy*, 77(May):193–202, 2017.

[5] Andreas Bjurström and Merritt Polk. Physical and economic bias in climate change research: A scientometric study of IPCC Third Assessment Report. *Climatic Change*, 108(1):1–22, 2011.

[6] Mike Hulme. 1.5°C and climate research after the Paris Agreement. *Nature Clim. Change*, 6:222–224, 2016.

[7] Martin Kowarsch, Jason Jabbour, Christian Flachsland, Marcel T. J. Kok, Robert Watson, Peter M. Haas, Jan C. Minx, Joseph Alcamo, Jennifer Garard, Pauline Riousset, László Pintér, Cameron Langford, Yulia Yamineva, Christoph von Stechow, Jessica O’Reilly, and Ottmar Edenhofer. A road map for global environmental assessments. *Nature Climate Change*, 7(6):379–382, 2017.

[8] Robin Haunschild, Lutz Bornmann, and Werner Marx. Climate Change Research in View of Bibliometrics. *PLoS ONE*, 11(7):1–19, 2016.

[9] Michael Grieneisen and Minghua Zhang. The Current Status of Climate Change Research. *Nature Climate Change*, 1:72–73, 2011.

[10] Emily Grubert and Anne Siders. Benefits and applications of interdisciplinary digital tools for environmental meta-reviews and analyses. *Environmental Research Letters*, 11(9):93001, 2016.

[11] David M Blei, Andrew Y Ng, and Michael I Jordan. Latent Dirichlet Allocation. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, 3:993–1022, 2003.

[12] Alex Csiszar. How lives became lists and scientific papers became data: Cataloguing authorship during the nineteenth century. *British Journal for the History of Science*, 50(1):23–60, 2017.

[13] Derek Greene and James P Cross. Exploring the Political Agenda of the European Parliament Using a Dynamic Topic Modeling Approach. pages 1–47, 2016.

[14] D D Lee and H S Seung. Learning the parts of objects by non-negative matrix factorization. *Nature*, 401(6755):788–91, 1999.