Can We Measure Whether a Climate Story Lands?

Search behavior as a signal for near-term climate impact communication — a brief from the Gateway Cities study

María Pastora Sandoval Campos, MA · Mirador Antártico · SCAR OSC 2026, Abstract ID 122

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The gap this addresses

Cross-disciplinary climate impact research typically measures physical and ecological change — ice loss, temperature trends, ecosystem shifts. It rarely measures whether that change actually reaches public attention, and through which channels. This brief summarizes findings from a broader study of internet search behavior around the word “Antarctica” that suggest public attention to climate-linked events is itself something we can observe and measure, not just something we broadcast and hope lands.

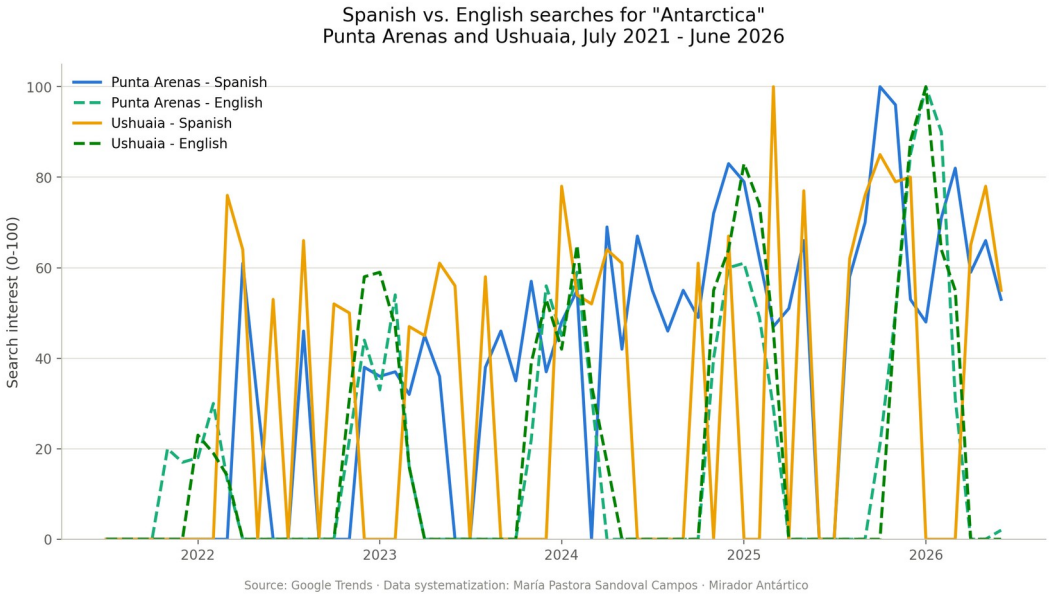
What was studied

Five years of monthly Google Trends data (July 2021–June 2026) for the term “Antarctica” (and local-language equivalents) across the five Gateway Cities — Punta Arenas, Ushuaia, Hobart, Christchurch, Cape Town — and five major world capitals (New York, London, Moscow, Tokyo, Delhi), including a shared-scale comparison to allow genuine magnitude comparisons rather than independently-normalized ones.

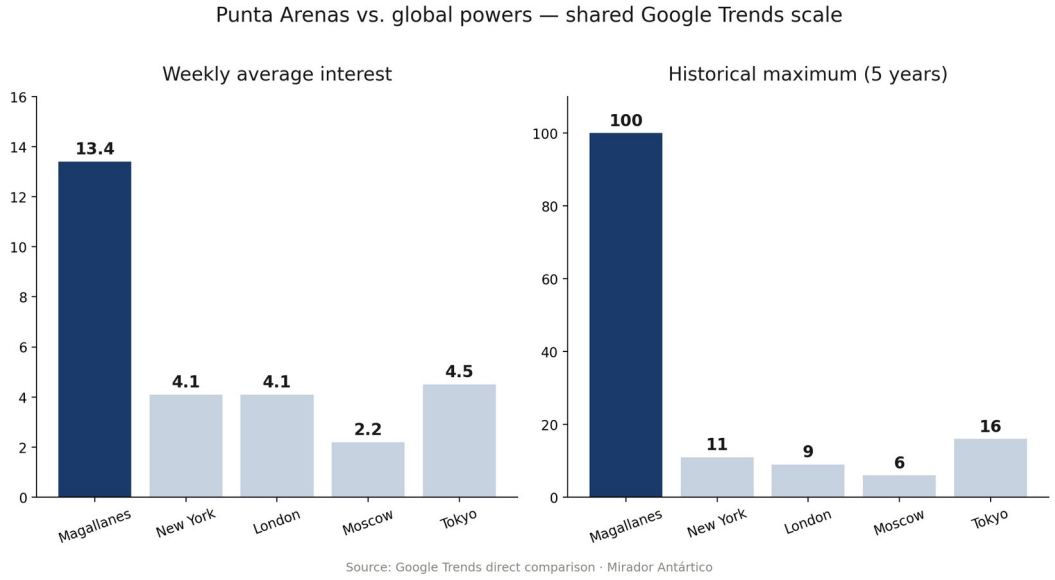
Three findings relevant to this workshop

- A genuine climate signal shows up, unprompted, in public search behavior. The “Antarctica is turning green” finding — a real, published climate-science story — produced independent search spikes in Cape Town, Moscow, and New York, with no coordination between them. This is a case of a specific climate-linked finding visibly reaching general publics across three continents, detectable in low-cost, publicly available data.

- Language, not geography, determines which audience receives a story, and when. In Punta Arenas and Ushuaia, the same real-world event produced search peaks at different times depending on the language used — local-language audiences engaged as the story unfolded; English-language (international) audiences caught up only once the story reached international coverage. Any communication strategy aimed at “the public” in a Gateway City may in practice be reaching two distinct, non-overlapping publics.



- Global attention to Antarctica is low-and-constant; Gateway City attention is silent-then-episodic. Comparing Punta Arenas directly against four world capitals on one shared scale, the capitals show near-constant but low-intensity background curiosity (present almost every week, never high). Punta Arenas is silent roughly 80% of the time, but its peaks — tied to concrete events — exceed anything the capitals reach across five years. Impact communication timed to “when something happens” may work very differently in a Gateway City than a strategy timed for sustained, low-grade global outreach. In direct, shared-scale comparison: Punta Arenas averages 13.4 versus 4.1 (New York), 4.1 (London), 2.2 (Moscow) and 4.5 (Tokyo) — and while the capitals never exceed a ceiling of 9-16 points across five years, Punta Arenas peaks to 100.



A possible contribution to Theme 4

Search-trend monitoring is inexpensive, publicly available, and updates in near-real time — properties that make it a plausible lightweight complement to existing impact-communication tools. It cannot replace direct engagement research, but it may offer AntClimNow a low-cost way to retrospectively check whether a given climate finding or event actually reached public attention, in which language communities, and for how long — a question this workshop's cross-disciplinary framework is well positioned to take further.

Open question for discussion

Do search-attention spikes for climate-linked Antarctic events correlate with any downstream effect — policy attention, funding interest, behavior change — or do they function as noise that fades within weeks without further consequence? This remains untested and could be a natural next step for cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Full methodology, five-year dataset and complete findings available in the accompanying SCAR OSC 2026 digital poster (Abstract ID 122) and paper — available on request.