

## Covering Synergistic Effects of Climate Change: Global Challenges for Journalism

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### **Abstract**

This writing positions the accompanying volume within a realm of complications of climate change journalism that operates amid recognized pressures of journalistic practice through notions of political economy, the social and cultural influences shaping news explanations, and critical interpretations of the current global crisis of a warming planet. Specifically, this volume is interested in the how journalism may function among “synergistic effects” of climate change, the compounded impact of severe weather, social and political responses to changing global warming, and the often-unfortunate results and impacts on our environments as global communities attempt to address climate events already challenging for journalists to cover and the social and cultural outcomes associated with them.

### **Introduction**

Climate change does not occur absent of related social and cultural forces. The unfortunately increasingly politicized “discussion” over the causes of today’s global warming and climate change has superceded and subjugated the effects of the changing environment upon ecosystems across the globe (for discussion, see Gutsche, Jacobson, Pinto, & Michel, 2017; Pinto, et. al., 2018; Pinto et al., 2020; Takahashi et al., 2019). Climate change journalism, among the normalization of the very term “climate change” in news globally, is increasingly a rigorous and influential form of communication. At the same time, it continues to be challenged by events of spectacular scenes and stories of environmental disaster (Cottle, 2009), spectacle of the rising stars of and for climate change awareness (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2021), and the lasting effects of debate within journalism and journalism scholarship about the intersections of environmental journalism, ideologies related to the environmental degradation, and advocacy of and for solutions to slow or stop the planet’s demise (Bødker & Morris, 2021; Elia, 2021; Painter, 2019). Discourse about the role of journalism in covering climate change remains a barrier for environmental communicators and reporters to gain legitimacy in some social circles, with the positioning of global warming<sup>1</sup> as a “real thing” in of itself becomes a

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize the difference between “global warming” the measurable rising temperature of the Earth’s surface, and “climate change,” the multiple and measurable effects of that warming, but use them here almost interchangeable to empower and connect to the notion of “global warming,” which often becomes secondary in discussions of “climate change” as a rhetorical

“synergistic effect” of climate change coverage, whereas journalists must conduct sophisticated reporting and produce engaging storytelling of complex environmental issues while also fighting for legitimacy and authority in a fragmented and hyper-politicized and polarized media world (Gutsche & Hess, 2020).

For this volume, we define the synergistic effects of climate change as those independent but related aspects of climate change that are often treated separately, but that when considered to operate in unison, form greater challenges for society. And, as a result, these effects (think, sea level rise and non-coastal flooding amid forced migration of marginalized populations in the name of sustainability and gentrification) become more difficult for journalists and communicators to address (Pinto, Gutsche, & Prado, 2019). As these “synergistic effects” -- a concept adopted from science to marketing to reveal complimentary influences in addressing multiple ailments through a single or mixed medical approach or the reductions in corporate sales due to the influence of a myriad influences -- may appear, individually, as unique in their impact, this volume outlines the complications of their combined effects.

Consider heat: A warming and drying climate, widespread fires, a lack of water, and the social and financial outcomes of preventing, fighting, and recovering from fires presents a layered framework for the journalist to cover. At the same time journalists report on the “breaking news” of a wildfire, for instance, they must consider its cause and the potential of its relationship to the changing climate -- even if the fire was intentionally sparked by an individual, lightning, or a carelessly tossed and smoldering cigarette -- but that occurs within an environment of measurable weather patterns and climate. Journalists are forced, in a space of limited and short time, to either connect the dots of these information points, translate to public messages of those who do, or hold-back as information becomes available, the fires rage, and any possible effects of climate change become peripheral.

Indeed, the results and recovery from similar fires, individual and families’ financial ruin and hardship (McDonald, 2019), the increasing likelihood of someone experiencing homelessness following the destruction of their housing or the risk associated with battling the fires (Osgood, 2021), and the added stress on other geographies as entire communities may be relocated due to disaster (Warn & Adamo, 2014) become synergistic to the foundational landscape of environmental climate crisis. Such challenge emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic where synergistic effects of climate change, including wildfires, the mobility of residents displaced by fire, rising housing prices that restricted many from relocating, the added burden on public coffers to cover emergencies and expanding populations, and the very nature of the fear of and social responses to the pandemic coalesced (Holder, 2021). As another example of synergistic effects, we can look at flooding and issues of redlining in housing discrimination, particularly in the U.S., where poorer and non-white communities suffer disproportionately (Capps & Cannon, 2021). Additionally, “sustainable” efforts for energy production, such as by harnessing the wind, are hailed in journalism as both an environmental and economic boost while stories of the

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means, perhaps, of masking the causes of our changing climates. For more, see Whitmarsh, 2009.

deforestation to capture the balsa wood used in the towering turbines has an immense impact on human, insect, and animal life (Economist, 2021).

Most concerning in terms of the social role in synergistic effects of both climate change and countering it through journalism is the effect media itself play in environmental racism, marginalizing the impacts on particular groups by climate change and policies (Benchimol, 2021; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; journal-isms, 2021). One must not be remiss to also question the role of journalism and its intentionalities for both revenue and relevance in its incessant coverage of sport and entertainment industries that wreak havoc on the Earth for our pleasures (Miller, 2017a; 2017b).

And, lastly, and what is even beyond the scope of this volume, are the effects media have on the environment that journalists cover, including how war materials in international conflict are covered in news often as spectacle and not damaging to the environment (Hackett, 2017), journalistic boosterism (Gutsche, 2015) around development and sustainability fueled by the consumption of fossil fuels that sustain imaginations of our everyday lives (Polychroniou, 2021), reliance of journalistic models on advertisement for electronics and entertainment that contribute to expansive technological waste (Parikka, 2015), and even the travel, innovation, and production costs on the environment associated with journalism and media production (e.g. Vaughn, 2019). These outputs by mediaworkers and industries represent a greater challenge to address for scholars and journalists alike, because of the social, cultural, and economic ramifications of unveiling their contributions that ail the climate, including the expansion of vast server farms to support digitization that rely on immense amount of electricity to run and cool (Pärssinen, et al., 2018). We would also be irresponsible to focus this conversation of climate change effects and the challenges to journalism (and journalists) by solely focusing on the human toll. Indeed, journalism remains focused in its climate coverage not on the planet itself and its wealth of other forms of life (Almiron & Zoppeddu, 2015; Newburger, 2020). How do (or do) journalists cover these relationships in terms of climate change?

To address how journalists may (or may not) be covering the layered effects of climate change, this collection of articles emerged from a June 2020 workshop, UK Underwater, held by the Data Science Institute at Lancaster University in the U.K., which focused on developing collaboration between data and environmental scientists, citizens, students, educators, and journalists to create research- and science-based journalism about dangerous flooding in the UK.<sup>2</sup> In this volume, contributors look at the complexities of communicating climate change and its daily outcomes often covered in the news, including widespread flooding, heat waves, brownouts, and climate migration, at a time when accelerating warming is spreading environmental change to populations across the globe. In these pages, we examine how environmental change is compounded by synergistic effects of global pandemics, evidenced by COVID-19, and by the motivations of capitalism and consumption, population growth, conflict, and social contestation. (Indeed, COVID-19 was an intersection of pollution, social behavior,

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<sup>2</sup> View presentations from UK Underwater here: <https://bit.ly/30i6zXK>.

mobility, and inequality, which journalists were forced to cover while also tracking the virus, death, and resiliency.)

As transformations (digital and otherwise) sweep across journalism industries and occur during shifts in media-state relations around the world that have led to tumultuous changes and challenges in how journalists are able to identify, cover, and explain the causes of climate change, the possible solutions, and predict environments of the future while dealing with a multitude of crises, the work in this volume becomes even more important. Therefore, we have divided this body of work into three major sections. The first section, “Covering Communities, Climate, and Contestation,” focuses on articles about on-the-ground challenges of capturing the meanings and messages of climate change communication amid interpretive communities and audiences of social, ideological, and cultural contestation. Here, among other scholars in the section, Mushfique Wadud discusses the synergistic effects of Capitalism and climate change through the lens of precarious freelance journalists in South Asia, a group that is increasingly being relied upon to cover environmental issues for news outlets while also being under-valued and -resourced. Issues of financial and physical risk, Wadud writes, is contributing to journalists deciding not to cover some of the more pressing issues of environmental and public health complications. Also in this section, from the UK, Lawrence Brannon, Lisa Gold, Johnny Magee, and Geoff Walton present the potential promise of interactive documentaries (I-Docs) to cover the layered meanings of climate change. These immersive and interactive forms of new media, the authors argue, reveal the power of intersections of non-linear narrative structures and gamification that may be suitable for environmental journalism in the future. And, from Norway, Anne Hege Simonsen focuses on visual representations of wind turbines as a sustainable form of energy production to save the planet, writing that based on her research, “the symbolic meaning of wind power icons is transitioning from representing a hopeful ‘future perfect’ to symbolizing nature degradation and political arrogance.” Simonsen calls for “contextual awareness when it comes to identifying visual meaning, and caution about treating ‘solution visuals’ as ready-made tools for greater climate awareness.” Throughout articles here, authors provide a critical lens toward the predicament and promises of visual, digital, and precarious journalism to capture and explain the climate crisis.

In the next section, “Climate Coverage During COVID-19: A Crisis of Truth and Trust,” articles unpack synergies of human and natural environments at a time when the impacts of both kinds of crisis collide. Among other published articles here, Dimitrinka Atanasova in the UK discusses how journalists use metaphor to address “positive lessons” from COVID-19 and climate change, arguing that constructive and solutions journalism were forms for reporters to articulate issues of problem-solving that might crossover between the two crises and the risks associated with both the pandemic and an ailing planet. From Pakistan, Waqas Ejaz, Muhammad Ittefaq, and Muhammad Arif report that among climate journalists there “following the Western process and model of environmental journalism impacts their routine and climate coverage,” that “advertisers and corporations significantly influence their news stories on environmental issues” and also “journalists believed that there is no widespread climate misinformation in Pakistan, thus reducing the need for fact-checkers.” Such cultural and social influences have a measurable influence on how the environment is covered, they write. And from Greece, Minos-

Athanasios Karyotakis in Greece is also among others in this section where he identifies a “systemic undermining of human impact on the environment” in news coverage of the Mati wildfires in 2018, with journalists focusing on political environments rather than natural or human ones. Articles in this section reveal the continued presence of competing truths in reporting on climate change and the embedded conflict for journalists to build trust through their reporting that reflects realities of global warming.

In this volume’s final section, “Journalistic Attitudes and Attempts in Covering Climate Complications,” scholars abound in their works on understanding journalists’ and journalism’s interpretations of climate change. For example, Nadine Strauß, James Painter, Joshua Ettinger, Marie Noëlle Doutreix, Anke Wonneberger, and Peter Walton write about journalists’ reflections upon their coverage of 2019 heatwaves across Europe and The Netherlands. Here, the authors relay findings from journalists who discuss their need for growing knowledge surrounding potential for better reporting of extreme weather events. While not able to dissect connections between climate change and extreme weather writ large, reporters in this study chose to focus on their interests surrounding specific links between heatwaves and climate change, their reliance on science experts for sources in such coverage, their refusal to include climate change deniers in their coverage of heatwaves, their commitment to educating publics rather than advocating for the environment, and their opinions that more reporting -- and specialized reporting -- on climate change is needed.

Several examined case studies of journalism practice in an age of intensifying climate change impacts. Among a host of other articles in this section, one by Mathias de-Lima-Santos explores the initiatives of an award-winning Buenos Aires newsroom’s foray into environmental journalism that is data-centric and collaborative, while also meeting the social and institutional needs and pressures of advertising by branding the news as environmentally concerned. Here, we see the pressures of journalists across the globe responding to the multifaceted challenges of working in market economies and making intersections of data, engagement, and the environment while also finding ways to interpret and communicate climate change effects. The BBC News Labs’ David Caswell also contributes to this section with an analysis that further interrogates “structural selectivity” in digital journalism in the US and UK. Caswell explores relationships between structures and systematic coverage in a realm of climate change to understand the means by which journalists can examine their potential and final multimedia productions through the processes of their work and the structural influences upon it.

Together, these sections provide critical and cross-cultural perspectives on the synergistic effects of both climate change through the multi-faceted crises and social inequalities, interpretations, and explanations in today’s digital journalism landscape while simultaneously questioning the multiplicities of challenges inherent in increased multi-media-ness of journalism’s productions and responses to power and social influences that shape their final products of social and cultural expression.

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