

Reporters or missionaries. Changing roles of journalists and changing approach of news media

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Introduction:

For the first time in history, media must cover a topic that is super-meta:

It is both hyperglobal and microlocal; although developing slowly, it has sudden effects; it influences the world economy and the daily living standards of individuals; and in the media, it influences reporting specialties from the economy and defence to healthcare and science, from travel and lifestyle to politics and sports.

In 2009, the authors and others began an international collaborative environmental journalism education project between Australian and European universities.

This paper explores how journalists' self-perception as neutral observers is challenged by new responsibilities towards the community. It discusses the levels of the news coverage by journalists in different countries, and looks into different categories of news criteria and news stories leading up to the COP15 United Nations climate summit.

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The authors believe that in the era of climate change, campaigning journalism is needed. And that it's better to err on the side of caution.

Science makes mistakes. IF it turns out that CO2 and other emissions are less harmful than first thought - great.

If not and journalism did not do its job of informing and enlightening the public then it will bear a heavy burden of responsibility to the end of time.

There are very strong reasons for the media covering COP15 to go all out in holding the leaders accountable for achieving concrete results. Whether this requires a new set of standards, and whether journalism education can keep up with these requirements, is not fully agreed among the authors. It depends partly on definitions. Campaigning journalists have always existed; it's part of muckraking (strong investigative journalism). Journalism must pursue the truth and expose powerful interests.

The answer now may be a shift to pure crusading journalism, although disputable. Nothing else has worked so far - journalistically, we're down to the last tools available.

Background:

In 2008, the authors and others began an international collaborative journalism project with four Australian and five European universities in the field of environmental journalism. The project - named Global Environmental Journalism Initiative (GEJI) is supported by the European Commission and the Australian Government.

The project is the first of its kind in Europe and Australia, and anywhere else that we know of. Major media organisations are supporting the GEJI project.

The reasoning behind the GEJI project is presented in another presentation and paper at the Global Dialogue conference: "Developing collaborative teaching and curriculum in environmental journalism". That paper also discusses the perspectives in today's and tomorrow's media environment. While this paper discusses the "meta" characteristics of climate change reporting, along with the implications on the media professionals - from the viewpoint of journalism education and training.

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Climate Change Reporting: The "meta" characteristics

Climate change is a topic that is "meta" in all senses - and represents a unique challenge for journalism.

So, nothing is just what it seems; journalists need to be able to see the links and connections; journalism education must teach the perspectives.

This section describes some of these meta characteristics.

Global characteristics:

"Climate" is as global as it gets.

Neither the causes nor the effects of climate change respect borders.

The microlocal characteristics:

The short- to medium term *effects* of a changing climate is right here, and is seen even in a local Northern Århus garden: this very August, they started digging up the streets in these neighbourhoods to separate the sewers; rain water in one system, waste water in another. Inhabitants will dig holes and construct cesspools. Why so? Experts expect heavy rainfalls more often than the existing sewer system them.

What *causes* climate change is similarly microlocal:

The meat in the lasagna for dinner last night had a sad track record involving a cow's methane emissions and the combined CO2 emissions from agriculture and meat production.

Every car start counts; every light bulb; every little tree. It is the everyday activity of almost every human being that counts, along with the everyday activity of the biggest companies.

The long term characteristics:

The *long term* effects are slow to evolve. Greenland does not get "green" overnight. Glaciers built through millenniums need many years before melting away. Ocean temperatures shift over decades. Deserts can grow by meters monthly, not by hundreds of kilometres.

The sudden characteristics:

The *sudden* effects of a changed climate are brutal: floodings, hurricanes, bushfires.

Global economy and individual income:

Take the headline words from Angel Gurría, Secretary-General of the OECD, and James P. Leape, Director General of WWF International; on October 15th: "Climate change: the biggest threat to economic recovery". They mentioned among other matters how more than one million Chinese people are already being employed in the country's renewable energy sector.

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Climate Change Reporting

- all over in the media's specialties and the journalists' beats:

The presence in all aspects of society puts yet another dimension to the "meta" status of climate change. All reporters must know about this topic - which is also a first-time-situation.

Sports:

International sports events are heavy polluters. In order to buy indulgence for the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canadian organisers assigned an Official Carbon Offset Supplier and campaigned for individuals to change their lives with regards to physical activity and travel.

<http://www.olympic.ca/en/news/project-blue-sky/>

At the IOC congress meeting in Copenhagen last month, CC was a commonly mentioned factor. Tokyo addressed it very directly in the city's presentation before the IOC: <http://www.reuters.com/article/olympicsNews/idUSL210206820091002>

In the welcome speech from the Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, CC was a top priority. And when he later on met with US President Mr Obama, Climate Change and COP15 was one of two main topics.

Arts/culture:

The National Gallery of Denmark's current exhibition is "Nature Strikes Back".

<http://www.smk.dk/smk.nsf/docs/forside!opendocument>

Pop music, entertainment:

Sir Paul recommends meat free days to fight climate change. And it gets reported, even in the Independent, when a former Beatle discloses an opinion.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/news/mccartney-urges-meatfree-days-to-tackle-climate-change-1705289.html>

Lifestyle, fashion:

Male Waxing. Hay Fever. And next to these stories in the Lifestyle section, a story on the number of Tasmanian houses being threatened by sea level rise.

http://www.themercury.com.au/article/2009/10/28/106115_lifestyle.html

Defence, military:

IPCC and the British Stern report have estimated the number of climate refugees to reach hundreds of millions in 2050.

Back during Bali in 2007, UNEP (and others) claim that "Combating climate change will be a central peace policy of the 21st century".

<http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=523&ArticleID=5720&l=en>

Can land devastation, water supply, oil supply lead to conflict? Darfur, Palestine, Iraq...

Travel:

Travel reporting is pretty much just that, maybe with a blurb about your emissions. But we do see stories about changes in tourism patterns. We see "go before it's too late" stories. And we see travel stories about how bad things are.

Example: recent Danish Broadcasting Corp. series on "Klimaduksen og blærerøven".

http://www.dr.dk/DR1/Klimaduks_og_Blaereroev/

Education:

Climate change issues are important in the entire school system; even 10 year olds discuss the melt away of Arctic glaciers in class. The Nordic Council of Ministers assigned a Climate Day 11th of November to have pupils and students work on climate issues during this fall.

<http://klimanorden.org/mobile/index.html>

Local politics, urban politics:

The top story on local Århus morning radio news last week, leading to this month's local elections was: Deputy mayor Peter Thyssen proposes marriage to neighbouring municipality Samsø (an island) - and the reasoning is the perspective in Samsø's attempts to become co2neutral.

Business, marketing:

Climate change is on every bigger company's agenda, and they tell us the nice stories:

Example: Food retailer Sainsbury's wants an all-green image: <http://www.j-sainsbury.co.uk/cr/index.asp?pageid=6&from=flash>

Example: World's largest container carrier Maersk fights to reduce emissions from vessels - <http://media.maersk.com/en/pressreleases/2009/Pages/APMM050509.aspx>, all of which can affect stock prices.

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Climate change as a beat in itself:

It is, yes, to some extent and in some places. In Denmark, as an example, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation has appointed a Climate Reporter; although he at a (skype-enabled) panel discussion at the DSMJ admitted that there is this risk of fatigue among the editors and the audience; the big challenge to reporters lies in post-COP15-reporting. The same concern was and is expressed by other prominent climate change reporters and editors.

But you don't have to do content analysis to understand the gross imbalance between climate change and the other beats, although the topic has been high on the policy agenda for the last 3-4 years globally.

A useful beat to compare climate change reporting to is business reporting, because of the age-old conflict between business and the environment. All human endeavours have effects on the environment, especially many business projects. Historically business reporting has had the upper hand and still has.

Indeed, most media outlets have their own business supplements/segments; the few climate change stories that occur are scattered haphazardly throughout.

There are several theories why this is, and one of the more likely is that environmental/climate change stories 'ooze' whereas business and most other stories break. Another theory the fact that that many readers have financial interests in business stories.

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Changing coverage:

Nevertheless, we have seen climate change coverage changing, not just growing. Perhaps most significantly, we believe, the sceptics are getting less space.

But shouldn't the sceptics have a 50/50 airtime/space?

No.

The "balance" ideal is about balance, neutrality, objectivity during research and analysis (think it over; we do not give 50 pct airtime to Drunken Drivers' Club to defend the killer whenever we have alcohol involved in a fatal car accident).

And: Ever since Naomi Oreskes' article appeared in the journal *Science* in 2005 the argument has been settled, and more so since the last IPCC report in 2007.

Seen from Australia, the UK and Denmark, the sceptics are still there and are still getting a voice; in DK e.g. the Danish People's Party (government supporter and back-up) stated recently they did not want preparations for COP15 to turn into "hallelujah" politics, and got lots of airtime on that one.

Some newspapers maintain regular scepticism, still.

We do seem to have a left/right axis; *leftish* media are a step ahead and have overcome any sense of obligation to report the sceptics' unscientific views, while some more *rightish* media have not come to that stage (yet).

The sceptics have been linked to strong economic and political powers and lobbyists; a fact that might have helped them endure.

Another change that has occurred: political journalists (and sometimes some of the best) are starting asking the must-ask-questions: Will the politicians keep their promises? Can the government fulfil its aims, short-term and long-term? Are their aims sufficient?

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News criteria:

Climate Change-related topics become the top story mainly when they are political stories; they also become top stories when new or old scientific knowledge is being released (ice cap melting, coldest summer in a decade etc.).

Is "climate change" also a news criterion in itself? Or will it become one? In Denmark, everything related to the COP15 UN summit is considered somewhat newsworthy. But generally, climate change currently only scores low on the orthodox news criteria that determine what is defined as news by media outlets.

Perhaps this will shift once prime real estate is under a real threat from sea levels rising, or once the number of climate change refugees increases.

But the words have definitely found their way into the closely related topics (e.g. energy prices or urban air pollution) - supporting the observation that the media professionals have taken climate change as an underlying fact and "meta" topic. And more or less, greenhouse gas-emissions and fossil fuel are established as something evil - meanwhile, terms like ETS and Clean Coal create heavy blurring.

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New news criteria:

One modern news criterion is the "news you can use"; news providing useful advice. When it comes to Climate Change, it is: Save energy; cut down travel; use the bike not the car; turn off your aircon; find the most energy efficient appliance; etc. This phenomenon very often occurs in a combination of relevant stories and concrete advice.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/environment/>

Radio Denmark in October, during the Autumn school break week, ran daily radio shows with an unstoppable number of ideas, tips, tricks for how to cut own CO2 emissions.

Campaigning journalism

Partisan or NGO media of course act as missionaries in climate change issues. But: we even see mainstream media preaching energy saving and advocating development of new energy sources. Campaigning heavily influences the news criteria of the news room.

The UK *Guardian* is one of the most significant examples, joining full speed the 10:10 campaign.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/10-10>

But we still await huge climate change initiatives from the mainstream media.

New journalism standards?

The media has always campaigned on major issues. Campaigning is a normal journalistic activity.

So, do we lose credibility if media run or join campaigns like these?

We think no, not necessarily; at least not if the audience accepts the subject of the campaign as a serious issue.

It could be argued that, on the contrary, the media needs to be out in front on this - the science is settled.

This raises some questions: with so many years spent doing nothing, can mainstream media reinvent themselves and do something? And if journalism education doesn't manage to educate journalists to take a stance, does that represent failure, and can the existing pool of journalists perform on this? Or should we count on other activists to act sufficiently?

Responsibility:

The authors agree that journalism should lead the way on this. We agree journalists should be running all the different stories, covering the main issues, the anecdotes and the little points.

Of course, journalism educators carry a part of that responsibility.

Politicians mainly respond to voters' views; if the issue drops even further down the political priority list, the press as a fourth power must see that it is elevated to the appropriate level.

In the lead up to the COP15 in Copenhagen we've seen leaders worldwide (political and business) play down what can be achieved in Copenhagen. Climate change can offer an opportunity for humankind to finally agree on something globally. One could argue that we are on trial in Copenhagen: If there are no concrete outcomes this would illustrate that in a social perspective our evolution as a species has not kept pace with our advances in technology and natural science.

If the leaders can't agree on a way to stop the sawing off the branch that we sit on - collectively, we're an even weirder bunch than we thought...

Journalism's first obligation is to the truth, and its first loyalty is to citizens (from the Statement of Purpose by the Project for Excellence in Journalism).

Journalism's responsibility always was to inform. It still is.

With climate change, is our responsibility expanded to make things happen? To reform? Yes.

Conclusions:

Meanwhile, we the media people and journalism schools need to assess our own professional practices (i.e. balance) and consider how they have contributed to long-term inaction over climate change, but also consider which practices have helped bring climate change to the fore in recent years.

This may call for new standards, or at least for sharpening the tools. Media has always had a crusading role, one of the paper authors simply claims. If it is so, media should indeed be crusading on this issue, while re-emphasising the obligations, loyalties and ethics of journalism. Because this issue is of overwhelming importance, dealing as it does with the future of humankind.

The importance of journalism on matters of corruption, incompetence and abuse of power - accepted and admired as an essential element of great journalism - pales into insignificance as against the need for journalism to help save mankind's presence on the planet.

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