



Covering Synergistic Effects of Climate Change: Global Challenges for Journalism

Robert E. Gutsche Jr & Juliet Pinto

To cite this article: Robert E. Gutsche Jr & Juliet Pinto (2022) Covering Synergistic Effects of Climate Change: Global Challenges for Journalism, *Journalism Practice*, 16:2-3, 237-243, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2021.2016475](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.2016475)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.2016475>



Published online: 03 Mar 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Covering Synergistic Effects of Climate Change: Global Challenges for Journalism

Robert E. Gutsche Jr ^{a,b} and Juliet Pinto^c

^aSociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK; ^bFaculty of Informatics, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania; ^cJournalism, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA, USA

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 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.

KEYWORDS

Climate change; COVID-19; environment; inequalities; synergistic effects

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unfortunately increasingly politicized “discussion” over the causes of today’s global warming and climate change has superceded and subjugated the effects of the changing environment upon ecosystems across the globe (for discussion, see Gutsche, Jr et al. 2017; Pinto, Prado, and Tirado 2017; Pinto, Gutsche, Jr., and Prado 2019; Takahashi et al. 2018). 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), the spectacle of the rising stars of and for climate change awareness (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021), and the lasting effects of debate within journalism and journalism scholarship about the intersections of environmental journalism, ideologies related to environmental degradation, and advocacy of and for solutions to slow or stop the planet’s demise (Painter 2019; Bødker and Morris 2021; Elia 2021). 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 warming¹ as a “real thing” in of itself becoming a “synergistic effect” of climate change coverage, where 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 Jr and 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 and form greater challenges for society. You can hear a discussion on this in Season 4's episodes 4 and 5 of the journal's podcast, "The J Word." 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, Jr., and 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 myriad influences—may appear, individually, as unique in their impact, this volume outlines the complications of their combined effects. In our podcast episodes, we also suggest synergistic effects of climate change may also be less physical but also philosophical in terms of the journalistic ideological battles on how to cover global warming and influences related to journalistic practice to garner and maintain audience attention and awareness through technological and immersive storytelling on environmental issues.

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, hold-back as information becomes available as to the cause(s) and determine possible effects of climate change become peripheral, all while the fire rages.

Indeed, the results and recovery from such fires, including 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 and 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 and 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

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

Most concerning in terms of the social roles inherent in synergistic effects of both climate change and countering it through journalism is the effect media itself play in environmental racism by marginalizing the impacts on particular groups by climate change and policies (Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Benchimol 2021; 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 beyond the scope of this volume are the effects media have on the environment that journalists cover, including how war material in international conflict are covered in news often as spectacle and not damaging to the environment (Hackett 2017), journalistic boosterism (Gutsche, Jr 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., Vaughan 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 relies on the immense amount of electricity to run and cool (Pärssinen et al. 2018). We would also be irresponsible to focus this conversation on climate change effects and the challenges to journalism (and journalists) by solely focusing on the human toll. Indeed, journalism remains focused on its climate coverage, not on the planet itself and its wealth of other forms of life (Almiron and 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.² 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, 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 undervalued and -resourced. Issues of financial and physical risk, Wadud writes, are 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, the authors provide a critical lens toward the predicament and promises of visual, digital, and precarious journalisms 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 journalisms were forms for reporters to articulate issues of problem-solving that might cross-over 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" "advertisers and corporations significantly influence their news stories on environmental issues" and also that journalists they spoke with "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 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

journalisms' 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 the 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, upheld their reliance on science experts for sources in such coverage, as well as 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 authors 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 in the UK 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 the 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 multimedia-ness of journalisms' production and responses to power and social influences that shape their final products of social and cultural expression.

Notes

1. 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 means, perhaps, of masking the causes of our changing climates. For more, see Whitmarsh (2009).
2. View presentations from UK Underwater here: www.ukunderwater.com.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the Data Science Institute at Lancaster University for their support of the UK Underwater conference in 2020, which led to this edited volume. We also thank the participants

in the conference and the many reviewers who participated in the selection of articles for this volume.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Robert E. Gutsche Jr  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6132-3493>

References

- Almiron, N., and M. Zoppeddu. 2015. "Eating Meat and Climate Change: The Media Blind Spot: A Study of Spanish and Italian Press Coverage." *Environmental Communication* 9 (3): 307–325.
- Benchimol, S. 2021. "Hurricanes aren't Just Natural Disasters – They Also Fuel Inequality." Truth-Out, October 8. Accessed November 11, 2021. <https://truthout.org/articles/hurricanes-arent-just-natural-disasters-they-also-fuel-inequality/?fbclid=IwAR1xMEUwycLg5brOAXGgGwmd-MYVv1rYPPnJkWtdCryn-2op6oBjZzAJ6c>.
- Bødker, H., and H. E. Morris. 2021. "Climate Change, Journalism, and Time: An Introduction." In *Climate Change and Journalism: Negotiating Rifts of Time*, edited by H. Bødker, and H. E. Morris, 1–9. London: Routledge.
- Capps, K., and C. Cannon. 2021, March 15. "Redlined, Now Flooding." Bloomberg CityLab. Accessed November 22, 2021. https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2021-flood-risk-redlining/?utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic&utm_content=citylab&utm_medium=social&fbclid=IwAR2DaFDjqfypY54BDIw_QLKDSphih5dKTjlyQOm9DLsUqPpOLPvkdbITGiY.
- Cottle, S. 2009. "Global Crises in the News: Staging New Wars, Disasters and Climate Change." *International Journal of Communication* 3: 494–516.
- The Economist. 2021. "The Wind-Power Boom Set Off a Scramble for Balsa Wood in Ecuador." *The Economist*, January 30. Accessed November 22, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2021/01/30/the-wind-power-boom-set-off-a-scramble-for-balsa-wood-in-ecuador>.
- Elia, E. F. 2021. "Journalists' Awareness and Understanding of Climate Change in Tanzania." *International Journal of Communication* 15: 22–40.
- Gilio-Whitaker, D. 2019. *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Gutsche, Jr, R. E. 2015. "Boosterism as Banishment: Identifying the Power Function of Local, Business News and Coverage of City Spaces." *Journalism Studies* 16 (4): 497–512.
- Gutsche Jr, R. E., and K. Hess. 2020. *Reimagining Journalism and Social Order in a Fragmented Media World*. Oxen. New York: Routledge.
- Gutsche, Jr, R. E., S. Jacobson, J. Pinto, and C. Michel. 2017. "Reciprocal (and Reductionist?) Newswork: An Examination of Youth Involvement in Creating Local Participatory Environmental News." *Journalism Practice* 11 (1): 62–79.
- Hackett, R. A. 2017. "Can Peace Journalism be Transposed to Climate Crisis News?" *Pacific Journalism Review* 23 (1): 14–24.
- Holder, S. 2021. "Where Climate and Covid Migration Converge." Bloomberg CityLab, August 9. Accessed November 11, 2021. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-09/what-happens-when-climate-and-covid-migration-converge?utm_campaign=socialflow-organic&utm_content=citylab&utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&fbclid=IwAR1pVHTk55NQw-3TnzCHhq9qYU9kAELkjaKI5O6-wpgQ-UiJQWcK3nybG40.
- journal-isms. 2021. "Media Play a Part in Environmental Racism." *journal-isms*, June 2. Accessed November 11, 2021. <https://www.journal-isms.com/2021/06/media-play-a-part-in-environmental-racism>.

- McDonald, T. 2019, December 20. "Australia Fires: The Huge Economic Costs of Australia's Bushfires." *BBC News*. Accessed November 11, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-50862349>.
- Miller, T. 2017a. *Greenwashing Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Miller, T. 2017b. *Greenwashing Sport*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Newburger, E. 2020. "Australia Fire Kills Half a Billion Animals as Crisis Mounts." *CNBC*, January 3. Accessed November 11, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/03/australia-fires-nearly-half-a-billion-animals-killed-as-crisis-mounts.html>.
- Nordensvard, J., and M. Ketola. 2021. "Populism as an act of Storytelling: Analyzing the Climate Change Narratives of Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg as Populist Truth-Tellers." *Environmental Politics*. doi:10.1080/09644016.2021.1996818.
- Osgood, B. 2021. "'Nobody Cares I Have Nowhere to Live': Wildland Firefighters Struggle with Homelessness." *The Guardian*, October 21. Accessed November 11, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/21/wildland-firefighters-struggle-homelessness>.
- Painter, J. 2019. "Climate Change Journalism: Time to Adapt." *Environmental Communication* 13 (3): 424–429.
- Parikka, J. 2015. "The Anthropocene has Been Shaped by the Media and our Digital Lives." *The Conversation*, February 4. Accessed November 11, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/the-anthropocene-has-been-shaped-by-the-media-and-our-digital-lives-37124>.
- Pärssinen, M., M. Kotila, R. Cuevas, A. Phansalkar, and J. Manner. 2018. "Environmental Impact Assessment of Online Advertising." *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 73: 177–200.
- Pinto, J., R. E. Gutsche, Jr., and P. Prado. 2019. *Climate Change, Media & Culture: Critical Issues in Global Environmental Communication*. Bingley: Emerald.
- Pinto, J., P. Prado, and J. A. Tirado. 2017. *Environmental News in South America: Conflict, Crisis and Contestation*. London: Palgrave.
- Polychroniou, C. J. 2021. "Tech 'Solutions' are Pushed by Fossil Fuel Industry to Delay Real Climate Action." *TruthOut*, August 22. Accessed November 11, 2021. <https://truthout.org/articles/tech-solutions-are-pushed-by-fossil-fuel-industry-to-delay-real-climate-action/?fbclid=IwAR1fZP17niwHgRS4s3EgUgwnDVD7jF003PBK5jb6MmA8mHhTepvccoPij1s>.
- Takahashi, B., J. Pinto, M. Chavez, and M. Vigon. 2018. *News Media Coverage of Environmental Challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean: Mediating Demand, Degradation and Development*. Cham: Palgrave.
- Vaughan, H. 2019. *Hollywood's Dirtiest Secret: The Hidden Environmental Costs of the Movies*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Warn, E., and S. B. Adamo. 2014. "The Impact of Climate Change: Migration and Cities in South America." *World Meteorological Organization* 63: 2.
- Whitmarsh, L. 2009. "What's in a Name?: Commonalities and Differences in Public Understanding of "Climate Change" and "Global Warming." *Public Understanding of Science* 18 (4): 401–420.