

Widening the horizons of journalism students reporting the climate crisis

Nicola Baird, London College of Communication

Abstract

This article concentrates on teaching journalism students to widen their horizons with regard to the climate crisis. It asks us to move away from the limiting pattern of news headlines concentrating on a single, identifiable event in order to tell a story and look at broader underlying issues, using the solutions journalism methodology. This is partly to better tell the story of climate change but also to develop a more positive mental attitude to such stories both for reporters and for readers. This is an approach that should spark considerable interest with our readers.

Introduction

The climate crisis spent years not being properly talked about or covered in the press. The rise in the planet's temperature due to humans' addiction to fossil fuels has long been the overheating elephant in the room. Now that frankly, rather terrifying, stories about climate breakdown are making the front pages, how can you help journalism students bring deep knowledge of climate change into their pieces without endangering their – or their readers' – wellbeing?

At the University of the Arts London, I've been working with 3rd years on one assessed unit to help them become critical practitioners who have a mix of skills - an understanding of key media concepts and well-honed writing skills showcased in a DTP magazine designed by the class. For the past two years students on the Contemporary Media Cultures BA have also been asked to embed an environmental crisis theme (about the city and/or nature) in their portfolio and assessments. The risk is that the grand aims of this unit will backfire as their tutors, all hired because they are specialist writers or photographers, will steer the students to focus on headline environmental bad news such as melting glaciers, worldwide forest fires, climate refugees and lost species. Although it is factually correct that we are at a tipping point with methane leaking out of the tundra, the slowing of the Gulf Stream, the jet stream changing and

the Greenland ice sheet retreating (www.UN.org/en/climatechange)¹, just sharing a smorgasbord of horror facts is also a recipe for undermining students' positive headspace and their power to develop their creative skills. It's not great for the tutors' wellbeing either.

Methodology

As a run up to the COP26 meeting to be held in the UK in the autumn of 2021, the London College of Communication's (LCC) internal Climate Action Group provided funding for a 24-page online magazine, *What's next: COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CHANGE* for publication in July 2021.

It was written by LCC staff member Nicola Baird with help from two students (Y3 Emily Moore-Watts in a design role, and climate activist and Y1 student Caoime Bergin as a contributor) for all staff at the University of the Arts London (UAL) – and more specifically the London College of Communication (LCC) – but it has tips in it that might help anyone faced with the requirement (or wish) to include the biggest challenge in their teaching practice. As chair of the Climate Action Group, Nicky Ryan, Dean of LCC's Design School explains: "We funded this project because of its innovative approach to a subject which can often seem overwhelming and frightening. Instead, the perspective offered here is one of hope, resourcefulness and the power of human agency."

At about the same time the UN published on 9 August 2021 a pre-COP26 devastating report with a "Code Red warning for humanity" from Secretary-General António Guterres, if rapid cuts in CO2 emissions are not made by 2030². Speaking personally, I felt – and still do – slightly sick reading this report, as if nothing anyone does will make any difference. And if that's true – nothing will make a difference - there is no motivation for anyone, including our students, to make any changes. Interestingly the first reviewer of this paper (anonymous) said "the problems of mental health deterioration of students, teachers and readers and the way that most news presentation of the climate crisis [plays] to that sounds like an interesting problem and one that needs to be developed. I have noticed over the past year my own deteriorating mental health dealing with a pandemic/climate crisis and an incompetent government..."

For clarification, please note that solutions journalism began life as constructive journalism.

Feedback

Feedback from using the magazine has come from students and staff *What's next: COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CHANGE*. Endorsements include:

Susi: "Loved the focus on positive action! And the invitation to interrogate what you're being told."

Jason: "A really great set of resources."

Zafer: "Fantastic."

Gracia: "I like the breadth of it, and the many specific examples and resources to look at. Definitely useful for teaching. I was recently thinking of where to find examples of sustainable filmmaking and indeed, this has led me to one."

Caoime, Y1: "Getting into the youth and active climate scene there's a lot of doom and gloom, from teenagers and young adults who are going through a lot, and especially with Covid. A lot of people look at climate change in a very negative way rather than the positive side of what's going well. I feel positive news is really important."

Wellbeing

It might seem a big ask for all tutors, and especially those employed on an hourly basis, who often have very limited amounts of time to write courses, to go another extra mile adapting their core practice. For ¹ www.un.org/en/climatechange is a good place to direct students for factual information as it also includes global efforts to tackle these challenges.

² See press release: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm20847.doc.htm> (accessed 14/12/21)

those people who've not spent years thinking about the environment (and in my case this also includes working in the publications department of Friends of the Earth for 10 years and writing/co-writing and editing 10 books on eco-topics) the short cut method of including a climate crisis theme is to follow the conventional news format that "if it bleeds it leads".

This idea was identified in 1989 by writer Eric Pooley in a now-famous piece, Grins, gore, videotape: the trouble with local news, originally published in New York magazine³ (and if you're trying to get this kind of climate crisis fact-fest Wikipedia is your friend), which flagged up the way local TV news was about violent local deaths.

"People don't want more news, they want better news," concluded Ulrik Haagerup from Denmark as he began to shape the elements of solutions journalism in his book *Constructive Journalism*.⁴

However, emotionally-triggering news – so often accompanied by detailed accounts of blood, death and devastation – is problematic for all media outlets which have seen big circulation falls and ad revenue drop offs in recent years (although bad news headlines might not be the only reason given the challenge from online sources). However, when this kind of journalist formula is applied to the awfulness of the climate crisis and the best front page story keeps charting the hottest, the wettest or a woman's howl of misery in front of dreadful flames echoing the photo of the running 'napalm girl' from the Vietnam War⁵ few of us have the mental strength to keep reading. It is far easier to maintain wellbeing and sanity by just getting on with life and ignoring the climate crisis. Worse, it might be adding to our students' pressures. We already have a situation where The Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP) reports that more than half (57%) of the specialist child and adolescent psychiatrists in England are seeing children and young people distressed about the climate crisis and the state of the environment.⁶ Eco-distress symptoms identified by RCP include low mood, helplessness, anger, losing sleep, panic and guilt.

This may not be mental illness, but it is not easy to focus on learning in this state. Indeed, Dr Bernadka Dubicka, Chair of the Faculty of Child and Adolescent Faculty at the RCP points out that: "The climate crisis is clearly affecting children and young people's mental health. Younger generations are growing up with a constant backdrop of understandable fear and worry about their future and the future of the planet. We need to be able to have open conversations and really listen to our young people. Empowering young people to engage with constructive, positive action, should absolutely be supported." RCP recommendations include listening to young people; spending time in nature; supporting young people to take action and feel more in control; calculating your family's carbon footprint and reminding, "your child that there are lots of people working on solutions that will make the world happier, healthier and safer."⁷

Solutions

Lecturers may not be legally in loco parentis, but we are pretty close to this responsibility – and we are the ones writing course units. For those of us teaching traditional media skills it is challenging to realise that we can choose to be a big part of the problem... or not. As Giselle Green, solutions journalism advocate and trainer, points out: "Regular news with its negative bias, leaves us feeling depressed, disempowered and disengaged from our world. By contrast, solutions journalism, in exploring what's going right rather than just reporting what's going wrong, has been shown to improve our mood, reduce anxiety levels and encourage us to get involved with responses to problems. Research has even shown that solutions stories about the environment motivate people to be more environmentally-friendly."⁸

And from a commercial point of view – either for clickability and social media sharing or buying physical publications - the Solutions Journalism Network claims: "solutions stories outperform problem-focused

3 Pooley E., 1989, Grins, gore, videotape: the trouble with local news, New York Magazine (not on line)

4 Haagerup U., *Constructive Journalism, the next mega trend in journalism* (Aarhus University Press, 2017)

5 See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2021/aug/09/greece-fires-wildfires-attica-greek-islands-evia-fire-in-pictures> in particular "elderly resident reacts as a wildfire approaches her house in the village of Gouves, on the island of Evia. Photograph Bloomberg/Getty Images (accessed 14/12/21).

6 See <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2020/11/20/the-climate-crisis-is-taking-a-toll-on-the-mental-health-of-children-and-young-people> (accessed 14/12/21)

7 See <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2020/11/20/the-climate-crisis-is-taking-a-toll-on-the-mental-health-of-children-and-young-people> (accessed 14/12/21)

8 See www.ncvo.org.uk/guide-to-constructive-journalism (accessed 30/09/21)

news; are more interesting, trustworthy, and uplifting; and inspire people to get involved.”⁹

We found students felt somewhat similar. Commenting on what might make a sustainability workshop (or topic theme) engaging, Lillie, Y1, said: “Finding out solutions is the optimism I’m looking for.” While Katy, Y3, said: “From the standpoint of a final year student I think some discussion around green and sustainable careers would be worthwhile. I feel many believe if they aren’t developing solar panels or working for the UN your career isn’t part or climate advocacy, when in reality, all fields, particularly creative, can do good towards the action of slowing and preventing climate change. Even if it’s just creating a platform for education or promoting sustainable creators or working for companies which have a climate action plan in place.”

Our students, in particular those from Gen Z (currently aged 16-25-years-old), have already had to cope with lockdowns. We want them back at university, learning with a certain amount of joy. Yes, they need to know what’s happening on the climate front, but they also need to be empowered to use their creativity and skills to help heal the world. We don’t need to mess with their wellbeing by pushing out eco-disaster facts as if we were the editors of the worst tabloids or curating an unpleasant Facebook page. Instead, as tutors we can be the facilitators able to share the good ideas and the solutions already out there.

To help tutors take this further at LCC we made a mini magazine *What’s next: COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CHANGE*¹⁰ available for anyone. It aims to help people working in tertiary education broaden the climate crisis conversation in their teaching – and learning by using the tips from the newish reporting method, constructive or solutions journalism.

One definition of solutions journalism is “rigorous reporting on the responses to social problems.” Practitioners tend to be very committed to this method (which is perhaps a weakness) and seek to rebalance the news so that people are exposed to stories that help them understand problems and challenges, and read stories that show potential ways to respond. A good example of a fully solutions journalism model is the UK magazine *Positive News*.

From a solutions journalism point of view the tragedy, for example, deaths from extreme weather, isn’t the story. Instead, you can look at angles that will throw up new information that gives wider context to the story. Ideas that offer a mix of solutions and calling out that from an eco-perspective might include looking at:

What are communities doing to tackle climate change?

How does a citizen’s assembly work – and why do they want free buses?

Who is making the switch to bike travel?

Can women save the planet – and if so, how?

What’s the thinking behind ‘system change not climate change’ and why and how is this concept gathering strength in the poorest communities?

How are councils (in your local area) tracking zero carbon targets?

The solutions journalism format should also help students ask critical questions of organisations so they cannot continue to get away with greenwashing with carbon and nature offsetting (eg, selling items from paddleboards to coffee beans as ‘zero carbon’)¹¹ or purplewashing (eg, engaging some women, in particular in STEM careers, at the same time as operating unjust and misogynist practices when extracting resources in the global south)¹².

Not only do students develop their agency as they are introduced to solutions journalism approaches, from an academic perspective they are better introduced to neoliberalism, environmental justice, the links between colonisation and the carbon economy and gain some thinking space about newer ideas such as the circular economy.¹³

As LCC’s Alejandro Abraham Hamanoiel pointed out: “Social justice journalism can be a tool for social change. [On this teaching unit/Journalism BA] “we hope to equip students with the critical skills to understand the complexities of environmental reporting while highlighting the imminent challenge of the

⁹ <https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/> (home page, accessed 14/12/21)

¹⁰ Free download of this 24pp magazine/booklet at <https://cmelcc.wordpress.com/2021/06/28/ways-to-include-climate-change-in-your-teaching-focus-on-solutions/>

¹¹ See <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/dangerous-distraction-offsetting-con> policy paper by Mike Childs and Paul De Zylva, Friends of the Earth 22 October 2021 (accessed 14/12/21)

¹² See World March of Women https://marchmondiale.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/EN_Documento_Contexto_EI_MMM-1.pdf (accessed 14/12/21)

¹³ Interesting approaches to the circular economy include the various Green New Deals and also Raworth K, *Doughnut Economics: seven ways to think like a 21st century economist* (Random House Business Books, London, 217).

climate crisis and the ethical imperatives of recognising and fighting against social inequalities.”

What next?

One of the key differences when using a solutions journalism approach is the need to prioritise the question ‘What next?’ after Who, What, Where, When, Why and How have been asked.

Helping journalism students to ask ‘What’s next?’ immediately empowers them to dream up, share, discuss, try out and write about/critique solutions that can tackle the climate crisis – from switching to slow fashion or following dismantling of neoliberalism with its unrealistic obsession for growth – in whatever way they want.

As we also strive to decolonise the curriculum and help all our students with attainment and progression – wherever they sit on the privilege scale – we certainly need to recalibrate how to communicate about the structural and environmental effects of climate change at a global scale. It’s not fair that young women like Mitzi Jonelle Tan in the Philippines grew up being “afraid of drowning in my own bedroom” thanks to storm surges and sea-level rise. But this info also needs to be shared – fortunately Mitzi does a good job at this on her hugely popular Instagram page @Mitzijonelle .

It was the 14-year-old Greta Thunberg (born 2003) who started School Strike for Climate – a movement that has spread globally, so we know this generation of students are hungry to do more with their learning than just pass tests. As Beatriz Silva, Y1, in the *What’s Next: COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CRISIS* booklet points out: “We can and should discuss the best ways to tackle the climate crisis and collectively come up with solutions to better our lives and stop the worst-case scenario from becoming a reality.”

The UN’s COP26 meeting in Glasgow, in November 2021, saw world leaders try to take a big view in a bid to slow down the climate crisis – and our students were watching as the headlines poured out stressing the world’s failures. Their efforts focused on cash, coal, cars and trees to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and keep the temperature no higher than 1.5C above pre-industrial levels.¹⁴ ¹⁵ These conference promises need following.

As tutors we can help our students navigate this age of panic, and learn skills, but for me it is helpful to revisit the definition of this cultural shift from old style ‘bad’ news to a solutions focus on the Solutions Journalism Network site which in addition to a bank of solutions journalism (SJ) stories says: “We’re talking about a shift from a pure watchdog role to a guide dog. In addition to uncovering what’s wrong, we also uncover potential responses. When we do that, we shift the way people engage with news and we heighten accountability. When we introduce solutions, we are proving that problems can be solved.”¹⁶ And that’s a powerful idea for all the players: learners, writers, readers, creators.

So, if you’re being asked to bring in the climate crisis angle for a unit, or an essay or even for just an hour’s seminar here’s hoping that a focus on the solutions will make the experience far more meaningful than the usual summative assessment. Maybe the booklet *What’s Next: COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CRISIS* will also offer you some inspiring teaching ideas. Good luck and please do share your experiences.

You can see and download the full magazine from London College of Communication’s Contemporary Media Cultures’ course blog <https://cmclcc.wordpress.com/2021/06/28/ways-to-include-climate-change-in-your-teaching-focus-on-solutions/>

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¹⁴ See post COP26 summary by Fiona Harvey <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/14/cash-coal-cars-trees-and-choreography-how-britain-kept-cop26-alive> (accessed 14/12/21)

¹⁵ Info about the thinking about human-induced warming and 1.5C see <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/faq/faq-chapter-1/> (accessed 14/12/21)

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/solutionsjournalism/> (accessed November 2020)

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