

# How to make more people read, listen, and watch when doing climate-journalism

*This paper is an attempt to bridge scientific knowledge and praxis of journalists, as to make an evidence-based foundation for climate journalism to make more people listen, read and watch. It is not a final list of facts, and can be elaborated, but the advice are based on valid knowledge from a great many numbers of reports and scientific papers (the quotes in *Italic*). It is supported by examples from the world of journalism.*

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## 10 good pieces of advice to make (young)<sup>1</sup> people read, listen, and watch when doing climate-journalism

1. Tell about the **solutions** to the specific climate problem you cover to avoid climate-news fatigue. Has anybody solved it or something similar? How? Can it be applied in your concrete context?<sup>1234</sup>

*“The Danish case thus indicates a greater need for climate journalism to function as a provider of guidance and solutions on how to deal with climate change in everyday life and focus less on political opinions while giving more space to experts”<sup>5</sup>*

Example: Building industry accounts for 38% of the world's Co2 imprint. [Here is one](#) solution to that problem.

2. For many people climate change seem distant and not of personal importance. Tell climate stories from your **local area**, to make your story present. Use it as can-opener to the tell about the bigger picture<sup>67</sup>: consequences of climate change in the future and globally.

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<sup>1</sup> ***Climate journalism seems to reach young people aged 18-34 years old better than other kinds of news.***

*"[...] New approaches to audience-led local journalism can deliver relevant local news, expand audiences and provide trusted, relevant sources of information on complex issues"*<sup>8</sup>

Examples about [water rising locally](#) and [pupils protesting](#)

3. **Cover nuances** in your story to heighten credibility and avoid polarization. Few people believe the world to be just black and white.<sup>9</sup>

*"Journalists have a vital role to play contextualizing expert knowledge and competing claims, promoting consideration of a broader menu of policy options and technologies, and facilitation discussion that bridges entrenched tribal divisions"*<sup>10</sup>

Example showing the [climate generation gap is not black and white](#)

4. Build connections from your story to people's **everyday life**<sup>11</sup>.

*"In order to increase feelings of self-efficiency, frames that are connected to every-day-life, such as economic issues or food and agriculture, induce that "everybody listens, because it affects all of us."*<sup>12</sup>

Examples about [foods affected by climate](#) and [pupils wanting more climate change education](#).

5. **Use soft language and imagery**. The use of *alarmism* in imagery and language is suspected to lead to desensitization in the audience<sup>13</sup>. Hence charged language using words like "emergency", "death", "doom" or "catastrophe", might create news fatigue, and stop people from spending time on your journalism and from engaging.<sup>14</sup>

*"The use of alarmism in climate change communication[...]has been shown to have the opposite effect to what was intended [...]it is suspected that processes of habituation and desensitization could reduce people's attention to news about impending catastrophes"*<sup>15</sup>

Example of what not to do ["Global heating risks most cataclysmic extinction of marine life in 250m years"](#)

6. **Consider how activist your climate coverage journalism** will appear. Most people prefer their news coming from a neutral source<sup>16</sup>.

*"Our survey shows that the majority (60%) still prefer news that has no particular point of view".*

Example of [article made with an aim](#) of doing something about the climate change

7. **Be transparent** to heighten credibility<sup>17</sup>. Share resources and link directly to scientific sources instead of other news outlets or NGO/think tank papers<sup>18</sup>. Today journalists must do more journalism for less money on more platforms than 20 years ago. That puts pressure on journalists and media outlets, and that might contribute to poorer journalism - especially regarding complex matters such as climate change. To keep and build credibility deeplink to credible sources.

*“The erosion of traditional news media and the rise of online and social media are generating growing opportunities for those in politics, government, agencies, businesses and others to bring their message to the public.[...] This situation has raised concerns about quality control in news media [...]”<sup>19</sup>*

Example: A CNN article about the science behind the climate crisis [linking directly to scientific articles](#).

8. Be clear about **what is scientifically established knowledge** and what is less established<sup>20</sup>. One scientific article on one subject is seldom enough to talk about “established knowledge”. Is it peer-reviewed? Is it new or older knowledge? Has the scientist making a statement done research in the field he/she expresses an opinion about?

*“When journalists fail to represent a range of expert opinions on these complex topics, or to investigate scientists' own biases, motives, and practices in promoting their research results, and policy preferences, they risk allowing themselves to be captures by a narrow ideological perspective, doing further damage to waning trust in news media.”<sup>21</sup>*

Example of what not to do; an article about climate [change is not just human made](#), even though an [overwhelming majority of scientists](#) believe so.

9. Be aware of **timescales in your coverage**. It’s difficult to understand something that’s going to happen in 30 years<sup>22</sup>. If you tell a story about now or the near future, it will overcome the “psychological distance”.

*“Human and ecological casualties scattered ‘across time and space appear insignificant when viewed in isolation”<sup>23</sup> and “climate change is generally perceived as something which mostly affects other parts of the world and which will have profound effects on future, not current generations. Connected to this many people think climate change is not relevant to them, and not urgent”<sup>24</sup>*

Example of what not to do: [Sea Level Rise of One Meter Within 100 Years](#)

10. **Graphic material**. As climate change can seem distant to people, use of pictures talking directly to the point of your story, preferably showing what can be done on a personal level and not appearing sugar coated works well. Human and animal suffering and other dramatic, sensational fearful or shocking images attract attention, but might give a sense of personal disempowering and climate fatigue<sup>25</sup>.

*“The images that made participants feel most strongly that climate change was unimportant, was those depicting aspects of climate change that participants noted as being positive (e.g., sunflower crops, street cafe), skeptical viewpoints (e.g. George W. Bush), scenes considered ambiguous or unrelated to climate change (e.g. tram) and those thought to be uninspiring to look at (e.g. crop irrigation).”<sup>26</sup>*

Example of [climate demonstration in Oregon](#) and [10 things you can do to lower your co2-footprint](#)

### A need for good climate journalism

In the 00s, there was a lot of skepticism about how seriously climate change should be taken. Today, most people share a common awareness of the seriousness of the issue<sup>27</sup>. Just over half of all Europeans believe climate change is today's biggest challenge – often higher rated than health and unemployment. Elsewhere in the world, too, many perceive climate change as profoundly severe<sup>28,29</sup>. At the same time, more than half of us want the media to cover stories about climate. So, in general, we think it's important and many want to know more.

If the purpose of journalism is "to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments"<sup>30</sup> the question arises: how do we cover climate the best way?

### Change in the general perception of climate change

Granted, our common starting point has changed. The seriousness of the issue has dawned on most people – although there are still skeptics and doubters, they are fewer than before. But the climate journalism hasn't seemed to follow. It is still largely borne of basic journalistic news criteria such as conflict, drama, and frequency, where disasters and doomsday prophecies are accompanied by photos of storms floods, heat waves and people on the run. As readers, listeners, and viewers, it may give us a sense that climate change is important. But at the same time, that portrayal of the world leaves us with a crushing sense of disempowerment and hopelessness<sup>31</sup> that can even cause psychological distress, not least among young people<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, journalism needs to evolve in line with our changing perceptions.

Where before in the 00s and 10s we asked, "Can this really be true", our generally changed perception has led us towards the question: "What do we do now".

Where several of us used to skeptically squint our eyes when the talk fell on the role of mankind for the higher temperatures on the globe, today more people nod when the speech falls on trains instead of planes and less meat in the stew. The question is how journalism will become more adapted to the present perception of climate.

Happily, there are small changes for the better arising in journalism<sup>33</sup>.

### Follow the path of solutions

One of the options and something that media users demand is guidance and solutions as to how we can engage in solving the climate problem<sup>34</sup>. By trying to answer that question in our journalism and find everyday people who do something we can relate to, we as journalists help to empower people to engage in changes. Not that climate coverage has to

be sugar coated. Not at all. The stories of catastrophic events must be told. Again, and again. To show what happens to the world. To show the seriousness of climate change. But showing what we as citizens can do, makes climate journalism more interesting for us as audience. And showing solutions in our journalism is just one of 10 points in this paper.

### Why 10 pieces of advice?

This paper is an attempt as to how to make climate media coverage better adjusted to the public awareness of the problem and giving information in the best possible way so people can make up their own opinion.

This paper is not a scientific article – but it is based on what scientists and rapports has shown. Hence these 10 pieces of advice are not whole the truth, but an attempt to build a bridge of knowledge between science and people covering climate in a way to make the most people read, watch, and listen.

The scientific investigations in media cover climate coverage are not an old field of study – e.g. as biodiversity or literature. Hence this paper draws both upon scientific papers regarding journalism and knowledge gathered regarding *communicating* about climate. As there to many seem to be a difference between the two, where communication is less goal oriented and more dependent than journalism, it is worth mentioning. Still, as the two disciplines are so closely related, this paper extract knowledge from both. The list could consist of more than 10 pieces of advice, it doesn't contain considerations e.g., about target groups, and it might be possible to find scientific evidence supporting other pieces of advice.

With these reservations in mind, it is rather evident this paper is not, and is not meant to be, the final list of facts. It's a list of good advice resting on valid knowledge from a great many numbers of reports and scientific papers.

<sup>1</sup> O'Neill, Saffron and Nicholson-Cole, Sophie (2009). "Fear won't do it" -promoting positive engagement with climate change through visual and iconic representations", *Science Communications*, vol.30, no.3, 2009, 355-379.

<sup>2</sup> Rögener W, Wormer H. Defining criteria for good environmental journalism and testing their applicability: An environmental news review as a first step to more evidence based environmental science reporting. *Public Understanding of Science*. 2017;26(4):418-433.

<sup>3</sup> Climate change and journalism (2022): Negotiating rifts of time, edited by Henrik Bødker and Hanna E. Morris, Routledge. Chapter 2, page 58.

<sup>4</sup> Markowitz, Ezra M. & Meaghan L. Guckian (2018). Climate change communication. Challenges, insights, and opportunities. *Psychology and Climate Change*, 1-28.

<sup>5</sup> Ida Willig, Mark Blach-Ørsten & Rasmus Burkal (2022) What is 'Good' Climate Journalism? Public Perceptions of Climate Journalism in Denmark, *Journalism Practice*, 16:2-3,520-539.

<sup>6</sup> <https://niemanreports.org/articles/five-tips-for-better-coverage-of-the-climate-crisis/>

<sup>7</sup> Climate change and journalism (2022): Negotiating rifts of time, edited by Henrik Bødker and Hanna E. Morris, Routledge. Chapter 2, page 64

<sup>8</sup> Jocelyn Nettlefold & Gretta T. Pecl (2022) Engaged Journalism and ClimateChange: Lessons From an Audience-led, Locally Focused Australian Collaboration, *JournalismPractice*, 16:1, 19-34.

<sup>9</sup> Hackett, R (2017). Can peace journalism be transposed to climate crisis news?, *Pacific Journalism Review* 23 (1).

<sup>10</sup> Nisbet, M (2019). Science, Publics, Politics -The trouble with climate Emergency Journalism. *Issues of science and technology* 2019.

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- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/overview-key-findings-2020/>
- <sup>17</sup> Wardle, Claire, and Hossein Derakhshan. 2017. *Information disorder: toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe with support from the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School
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- <sup>28</sup> <sup>28</sup> <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/how-people-access-and-think-about-climate-change-news>
- <sup>29</sup> <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/for-the-first-time-the-alarmed-are-now-the-largest-of-global-warmings-six-americas/>
- <sup>30</sup> <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/purpose-journalism/>
- <sup>31</sup> O'Neill, Saffron and Nicholson-Cole, Sophie (2009). "Fear won't do it"-promoting positive engagement with climate change through visual and iconic representations", *Science Communications*, vol.30, no.3, 2009, 355-379.
- <sup>32</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02582-8>
- <sup>33</sup> Lars Guenther, Michael Brüggemann & Shorouk Elkobros (2022) *From GlobalDoom to Sustainable Solutions: International News Magazines' Multimodal Framing of our Future with Climate Change*, *Journalism Studies*, 23:1, 131-148
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