

MADS NYVOLD
KATRINE GRØNVALD RAUN

YOU LIVE IN THE
NEW CLIMATE
THIS IS HOW TO REPORT IT



CONSTRUCTIVE
INSTITUTE



KATRINE GRØNVALD RAUN

is a reporter at the Danish daily Børsen covering climate and sustainability, and a fellow at Constructive Institute at Aarhus University on a scholarship from Industriens Fond. She knows a lot of global shipping, its huge carbon footprint and the sector's attempt to decarbonize transport. Katrine is fond of gathering her relatives in an all too tiny and old cottage on the world's most decarbonized island, Samsø.



MADS NYVOLD

is a reporter at Klimamonitor.dk, a member of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network (OCJN), and a fellow at the Constructive Institute at Aarhus University on a scholarship from Realdania. He tends to talk behind friends' backs about their cheap flights to holiday destinations. He cannot figure out whether this is down to pure jealousy, his fear of flying, or cognitive dissonance from reporting on climate change. Mads would like to reduce the enormous amount of candy he comfort-snacks every night (sugar production is CO₂-intensive).



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Introduction

Climate change is at the heart of almost every story, whether it's about the food we eat, the places where we live, or the work we do.

As a subject it is huge, complicated, systemic...but also often a bit zzzzzz. How do we tackle this? How do we make climate coverage a bigger part of the media, when readership and listener numbers are already dropping?


We want to dress you well for this challenge. To wrap your hippocampus in brightly colored CO₂-friendly second-hand cotton and give you tools and angles to bring climate coverage to the fore.

Because, as Wolfgang Blau, Managing Partner at the advisory firm Brunswick, and Co-founder of Oxford Climate Journalism Network says:

“Everyone should be a climate reporter. And if you are not a climate reporter right now, you will be.”

Plus, there's an overlooked bonus: When you include the aspect that climate change is **reshaping everything** and affecting every single human in your reporting, you'll say goodbye to a certain nagging feeling: That ever-lingering doubt about whether you've made the right choice and picked the most relevant story.

You're on it.



MORE CLIMATE
CHANGE? REALLY?
CAN'T YOU SAVE ME
THE TROUBLE AND
GIVE ME THE CON-
CLUSION?!

SURE! JUST
JUMP STRAIGHT
TO THE
TAKE AWAYS
ON PAGE 30



Private photo

It's time for newsrooms to get serious about how they cover climate change. Because the default approach simply isn't working. Scaring the crap out of people—however valid and fact-based that may be—doesn't seem to bring in audiences, and often backfires.

But what if covering climate change well wasn't just a duty, but a laboratory that we can use to make journalism better as a whole?

Luckily, newsrooms are now experimenting with more action-focused stories. More interactivity and feedback from audiences. In-house climate literacy training. And journalism for and BY young people, on the platforms they actually use."

- Katherine Dunn, Content Editor at Reuters Institute who also writes for Fortune magazine on climate change and the energy transition

Lessons from newsrooms

How do newsrooms engage in climate journalism more effectively?

Newsrooms across the world, like The Guardian, Bloomberg News, and the Norwegian national broadcaster, NRK, have all changed their coverage of climate change and are experimenting with how to handle the beat in a better way.

More reporters are covering the topic, and it seems slowly to be seeping from climate desks to other desks in the newsroom. But the change requires a great deal of effort from the media, as well as training, education, investment and possibly a new mindset.

Here are our recommendations for how to get serious about climate journalism:

- Broaden the coverage. It shouldn't only be the climate or science desk covering these issues. The topic should be the lens through which all journalism is seen.
- Develop a strategy that makes it clear for everyone how to cover the climate. In 2020, NRK established a new strategy when they realized that the “normal” coverage didn't work for their audience. Their feedback showed that their audience wanted articles about climate, but they didn't read them. NRK reorganised its newsroom with two climate desks: one with a news-focus and the other with a longer view.

They reset their climate coverage based on three principles: explain, engage, and create credibility, and selected five to six themes to follow every year. The strategy has had a “huge impact online in numbers” according to Hans Cosson-Eide, Climate Editor, NRK.

- Be careful with false balance. Science has no doubt: climate change is happening because of human activity. Think about your choice of sources on the subject and the journalistic reflex of always finding an opposing voice and seeking conflict. We are not here to convince people that climate change is real. “There is a growing audience out there who have moved past the debate of whether or not we should care about climate change, but just want to know what’s being done to solve it,” said Sharon Chen, Managing Editor, Bloomberg Green, at a seminar in November 2022.



Press photo

Without a systematic approach and a team covering it together, it was based on personal initiative from reporters. Although stories of course were written with the best intent, our climate journalism was to some extent too driven by reports published by interest organisations or actors in the field that contacted us. We wanted to take a step back from that and try to define news coverage on our own premises.

Climate change is rarely breaking news. And when it is not, it is a fantastic opportunity to work on our own projects and find stories that we think are relevant to the green shift and the public debate. That we take the editorial ownership of it and find solutions and cases that fit into that story is important for editorial integrity.”

- Hans Cosson-Eide, Climate Editor, NRK

Face the facts

The traditional news recipe with its focus on problems, novelty, conflict, and sensation needs an urgent overhaul.

The media are facing major challenges with people turning away from the news. According to a 2022 survey from Reuters Institute, 38 pct. say they often or sometimes avoid the news. It is too depressing, they say. They feel disempowered.

Climate coverage is suffering from the same kind of audience apathy, or 'climate fatigue'. Our audience struggles to process information about the dramatically changing climate – the wildfires, floods, people losing their homes, and distant climate goals set 30 years from now. A recent study based on online surveys in eight countries showed that people avoid news on climate for the same reasons that they are deserting regular news.

However, those who do consume news about climate change are more likely to agree that it is empowering in some way and that it prompts them to consume more information. They are also less likely to feel that news about the climate leaves them confused or contains conflicted views, the study shows.

One solution is to change your perspective. You will find some inspiration over the next pages.

Flip the narrative

How do we get people to read and engage in climate journalism?

The Constructive Institute in Aarhus, Denmark, emphasizes the need for greater nuance and solution-based journalism to create a more balanced picture of the world. Critical journalism is still essential, of course, but when you have documented a problem, you also need to present solutions to ensure that the audience isn't left with a feeling of negativity or despair.

To re-engage with the audience, we need to learn about and test climate solutions from entrepreneurs; hear how cities try to overcome the threat from rising sea levels; and frame some of the benefits from the green transition, such as healthier lifestyles, maybe a new way of thinking about the economy.

- When you describe a solution, do it in as detailed a way as possible. This will make it possible for companies or consumers to learn from the story. Focus on the how. And always remember the perspective: is the solution scalable. How big a difference could it lead to in the big picture?
- Stories about climate are often rooted in the rapid decline of our planet. But you don't have to use that as an angle every time. The problem does not always have to be the angle: try to rethink the story. Who is working with a solution that can inspire others?
- Critical journalism is essential to ensure that ambitions and goals from leaders, companies and others are not just empty words.

The three pillars of constructive journalism

Journalism for Tomorrow

The Ambition

To contribute to democracy through critical, constructive journalism

Focus on Solutions

Not only expose
the problems, but
also look for possible
solutions

Cover Nuances

Strive for the best
obtainable version
of the truth.
See the world
with both eyes

Promote Democratic Conversation

Engage and facilitate
debate, including
people in the
community



Press photo

If we investigate areas where we have problems in Sweden from housing-situation, young people finding a place to live, problems with gang shootings; constructive examples from other countries, where this has been handled in a good way, are always well read. They reach out to the audience in a very good way. To have a pressing issue, being able to show ways of handling it and have evidence that things have worked, those stories are very important to do. That has been part of our natural newsroom-strategy the past two years."

- Martin Jönsson, Editorial Development Director, Bonnier News

REMEMBER!

Use **proportions** when you write about fx greenhouse gases. If a state, company, or a citizen describe their carbon footprint compare this with another concrete example to make it understandable for the audience.

REMEMBER!

Always ask if a solution is **scalable** and how.



WHY OUR BRAINS ARE WIRED TO IGNORE CLIMATE CHANGE -AND HOW TO FIX IT

If we are familiar with the mental barriers to info about the climate, we can use them to gain more trust and interest from our audience.

Our brains automatically construct barriers to avoid hearing about the demise of our planet, according to Per Espen Stoknes a Norwegian clinical psychologist with a Ph.D. in Economics. In particular, two psychological self-defenses pose a challenge to how climate stories are perceived and digested.

Fortunately, these barriers can also work to our advantage:

1. DISTANCE

OUR MIND IS DESIGNED TO
IGNORE ABSTRACT CHALLENGES.



The climate crisis seems to be happening oceans of time away from our busy lives. The more distanced a problem feels, the less our minds bother to deal with it, according to Stoknes. We are much more interested in current challenges, such as the size of our energy bill, or whether to delete Tik-Tok.

To break this distance barrier, Stoknes suggests ditching the starving polar bears, melting glaciers and dystopian scenarios. Instead, go ultra-local.

Unfold the global angle by describing how climate change is already affecting our health locally due to air pollution, say, or the spread of bacteria. “Our health – or even more so the health of our children – is one of our main concerns. This is relevant right now and has a huge potential,” says Per Espen Stoknes.

2. DOOM

OUR REPTILIAN BRAIN ORIENTS ITSELF TOWARDS DANGER,
BUT ALSO QUICKLY DISPLACES AND GROWS TIRED OF IT.

It is difficult to strike a balance between too much hope-ism: "This new Carbon-removal-machine is a breakthrough!" - or too much fear mongering: "The tipping-point is reached! It's too late!"

Nevertheless, the doom angle is predominant. This is hardly ideal if you want your story to be read, because the simplest psychological defense mechanism is displacement. Part of the solution is according to Per Espen Stoknes to show opportunities and offer hope - and remember, while doom is a part of the climate narrative so is boom; alongside climate adaptation we are entering a post-industrial society with a new economy geared towards unlimited forms of energy.



THE STONE AGE DID NOT END
BECAUSE OF A LACK OF STONES.
OUR FOSSIL SOCIETY DOES NOT
END EITHER BECAUSE THE RESER-
VES OF OIL, GAS OR COAL ARE
DEPLETED - BUT BECAUSE RENEW-
ABLE ENERGY SOURCES ARE
SMARTER.

Per Espen Stoknes

Clinical psychologist, PhD in Economics

The four horsemen of the climate apocalypse

The likelihood of extreme weather events is changing.

People around the globe are experiencing more extreme weather events. But are these caused by climate change?

Well, this question is wrong! It is too binary according to The World Weather Attribution (WWA) initiative, a collaboration between several climate scientists.

Instead, ask how climate change has affected the likelihood and intensity of this type of extreme weather event.

That is the focal point of the emerging field of climate science called Extreme Event Attribution. The scientists have carried out 400 attribution studies — in some cases even as the weather event is unfolding.

Do check out WWA's website, when reporting on extreme weather events. You might be lucky to find a study on the event you are reporting on!

If an attribution study is not yet published, use their checklist when reporting on the four horsemen of the climate apocalypse:





Heatwave. Every heatwave in the world is now stronger and more likely to happen because of human-caused climate change. Don't be too cautious — heatwaves are unilaterally linked to global warming.



Floods. Extreme rainfall is more common and more intense because of human-caused climate change. Flooding has likely also become more frequent and severe but is also caused by human factors such as water management.



Droughts. They are becoming more common and more severe due to climate change but, locally, droughts are very complex and diverse, making it difficult to explain with certainty.



Wildfire. Fire weather is increasing in parts of all continents. The records of fires are very limited in some areas, making attribution very challenging.



Photo: Nicolai Oreskov Westh

"The climate crisis demands that we once again acquire new customs, new habits. New songs must be written. New heroes must be found. The best books should be written about this. The best music must be created in this. The best journalism should be about this."

Lea Korsgaard, Editor in Chief and Co-founder, Zetland, writes in an article from 2018

Combat carbon illiteracy - and your editor

Remember to explain core concepts about climate science.

The chances are your readers - and probably also your editor - lack basic knowledge of climate change.

And perhaps, after a couple of months or years of climate reporting, you tend to expect everyone to know what the carbon budget is, or what IPCC stands for, and the difference between 'weather' and 'climate'. Perhaps you've begun to use jargon and acronyms in your reporting as if COP-delegates (see that was an acronym!) were your main audience.

If so, your stories will probably not get the audiences they deserve. Your pitches to your editors have a higher risk of failure because your editor might not get the point either but is too embarrassed to admit it at such a late stage.

We all have our blind spots, even editors, and that's the challenge for you as a climate reporter. That's why it's always a good idea to explain the main climate principles for your readers.

Some examples:

- › Weather and climate both describe the state of the air around you, me, and our planet (see also ‘the atmosphere’). The important difference is that climate is the average of weather patterns over 30 years or more.
- › Scope 1, 2 and 3: - these are used to define emissions linked to a company or an organisation. Scope 1 relates to a company’s emissions directly linked to their assets or things they do. Scope 2 is coupled to the use of energy. Scope 3 to direct and indirect emissions associated with the business and coupled to the supply chain.
- › CO_{2e}: the e stands for equivalent. It underlines that carbon dioxide (CO₂)-emissions, which is the most dominant greenhouse gas and comes from burning fossil fuels, industrial production, and land use, is not the only gas driving global warming. The e points to greenhouse gasses as methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O) and others.



Press photo

"We would appreciate it if the media could better understand the impact we have as a large company. It is big. Of course, the media must be critical towards us, but at the same time the media can explore what companies can do and how we can achieve it. Companies must bear much of the responsibility for the transition.

There is a need for reporters who are knowledgeable about the field. Our employees and I are also learning new things, and it is important for the media to have a deep understanding of this emerging field. There is often a tendency to oversimplify in search of easy answers. I am not talking about the media in general, but nuanced reporting about the development could be very helpful."

-Hanne Søndergaard, Executive Vice President, Agriculture, Sustainability & Communications, Arla

Ditch the climate (for two seconds)

Remember why you wanted to become a reporter in the first place.

Okay, put this mini-book away for a moment. Close your eyes. Recall the latest climate-story? Think of the emotional photos or that funny angle.

Nothing? Mind gone blank? We don't blame you.

Climate journalism tends to go heavy on images of pipelines, pie charts and politicians. We become cautious. Our style becomes impersonal. The results are dry and impenetrable. Heavy going.

This advice will probably sound quite basic: Remember why you wanted to become a journalist. What turned you on?

Was it to talk to famous actors or become a rich TV-anchor? To bury yourself in FOAs in search of the new Watergate? To write about sports? (As we write this, the most-read climate story of 2023 was about how more homeruns are occurring due to the air slowing down because of higher temperatures at baseball grounds).

Well, all those motives are perfectly fair and relevant. Remember your motive and nurture your personal drive as a journalist, as you cover the most epic story of this century. Then your climate-coverage will benefit.

And, just in case, here is a final list of suggestions:

- Keep doing what you do best – the topic is just changing.
- Journalism is about mankind, not machines. This applies both in the choice of photos and angle regarding climate change.
- Remember what you tell your friends or colleagues at the water cooler about the story you are working on. The (funny) details you noticed and tell others about are often the best for the narrative. Try to preserve them in the final journalistic product.
- Experiment with new methods. See what's trending on SoMe. For example, can a new Insta-filter or top 10 list be copied to lift a dry story about the latest climate report?
- Use humor. Research is clear on how humor + communication is a powerful combination. Experiment with throwing some fun or uplifting stuff into your climate journalism.



Photo: Emma Smith, Wylie Agency

Getting eyeballs on climate coverage is a pertinent struggle. With videos the pressure is to find something good. But there is material out there. Sewage in rivers works well, for example. And then there is the technical thing: If a newsroom wants any of their coverage to be watched, they have to pivot to vertical video. The whole internet is turning to vertical video.

I am on Insta and TikTok because audience needs are there. It is one thing just being there and another being native and organic on there. What works well is when journalists are creating communities around their reporting, around their beats. Everything cross-pollinates."

- Sophia Smith-Galer, Senior News Reporter and TikTok creator working for Vice World News

Dare to be personal

A personal touch might resonate more with the audience.

In the Summer of 2020 wildfires and a brutal heat wave raged in California. Sammy Roth, the Los Angeles Times energy correspondent, covered the event. Or he tried to until he grew mentally exhausted. He chose to write about what happened to him personally. The resulting article marked a turning point.

“Here I was expressing my own fears, and my own desire for climate solutions. Wouldn’t that make me look biased? Wouldn’t I be better off sticking to the facts, explaining the scientific consensus in a traditional, third-person newspaper voice?” Sammy Roth explains in *Covering Climate Now*.

Roth has never received a greater volume of positive feedback. **Getting personal about climate change** made him a better reporter. You just must be transparent to the readers about the choice.

“This hasn’t hurt my credibility, or my ability to tell these stories. (...) Almost every day, I hear from readers who are grateful to see climate coverage that resonates with them.”

To be or not to be activistic

Should media play a more activist role in the biggest story ever?

For many, the answer is a clear 'no'. Journalism cannot be activism. Nevertheless, there are lots of examples of active journalism throughout history where opinions have been expressed or campaigns for a special case have been led by the media.

According to Wolfgang Blau, climate-adviser, news organisations must include in their ethical code how to delineate between journalism and activism and thereby develop a **shared language** to discuss this whenever conflicts appear.

In 2020 the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter invited Greta Thunberg to edit a paper about climate with no views, only facts. It required a delicate balance which led to concerns both internally and externally. Martin Jönsson, News Editor at that time, believes that they managed to handle “the dilemma of reporting together with a well-known activist, without becoming activists ourselves”. “If you have engaged writers, who believe very much in the severity of the situation and are extremely interested in the green transition, we must constantly work with them to make sure that they are not perceived as activists. We have to make sure that we have good editorial governance,” says Jönsson.

6 takeaways

Flip the narrative: Once a problem is well-documented, turn to the solutions and those who are working with new technologies.

Lessons from newsrooms: Broaden climate coverage beyond the science- or climate desk and develop a media strategy.

Combat carbon illiteracy: Remember to explain the most important climate principles for your readers.

How to fix the normal reactions: Distance and doom help our brain to ignore climate change. To solve these barriers, you need to make the climate crisis feel local, show opportunities, and hope, and remember the nuances.

Reporting on extreme weather: ask how climate change has changed the likelihood and intensity of these types of weather events.

Dare to be personal: Experiment with using your own experiences and feelings but be transparent about it.

Appendix

The knowledge in this book stems from interviews, articles, webinars, reports ect.

Articles: “Getting personal about climate change made me a better reporter” by Sammy Roth, Covering Climate Now, 2022. “Why your brain is wired to ignore climate change - and how to fix it” by Mads Nyvold, Zetland, 2017. “Journalism shouldn’t just describe climate change, it should fight it. Let’s start here” by Lea Korsgaard, Zetland 2018. "If you're not a climate reporter yet, you will be: Covid-19 coverage offers lessons for reporting on the climate crisis" by Wolfgang Blau, NiemanLab, 2021.

Webinars: “Business stories are climate stories: rewriting the finance journalism playbook“, seminar with Sharon Chen, Managing editor, Bloomberg Green, Reuters Institute Global Journalism, 2022. “What is happening with our news“, Nic Newman, Lead author, Reuters Institute.

Reports: “Reporting extreme weather and climate change – a guide for journalists”, Ben Clark, Oxford University, and Friederike Otto, Imperial College London, World Weather Attribution. “Climate Journalism that Works – between knowledge and impact“, European Broadcast Union, 2023. “How we follow climate change: Climate news use and attitudes in eight countries“, Oxford Climate Journalism Network, 2022.



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Mette Stentoft

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formatio.dk