

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.*

10 good pieces of advice to make (young)¹ 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?¹²³⁴

“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”⁵

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 picture⁶⁷: consequences of climate change in the future and globally.

¹ **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"*⁸

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.⁹

*"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"*¹⁰

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

4. Build connections from your story to people's **everyday life**¹¹.

*"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."*¹²

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 audience¹³. 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.¹⁴

*"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"*¹⁵

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

6. **Consider the extent to which your climate coverage could appear "activistic"**. The boundaries between activism and journalism can be fluid. But if your journalism has the clear and apparent goal of getting your reader, listener or viewer to think or act in a single, specific way – instead of just informing them – it might lose credibility. Most people prefer their news coming from a neutral source¹⁶.

"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 credibility¹⁷. Share resources and link directly to scientific sources instead of other news outlets or NGO/think tank papers¹⁸. 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 deep link 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 [...]”¹⁹

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 established²⁰. 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 captured by a narrow ideological perspective, doing further damage to waning trust in news media.”²¹

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 years²². 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”²³ 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”²⁴

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 fatigue²⁵.

“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)."*²⁶

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 2000s, there was a lot of skepticism when it came to how seriously the issue of climate change was to be considered. Today, most people share the common awareness that the issue is of substantial seriousness.²⁷ A little more than half of all Europeans believe that climate change is in fact the biggest challenge of today – frequently rated higher than health and unemployment issues. In other parts of the world, many perceive climate change as being profoundly severe^{28,29}. And in addition to that, more than half of us want the media to cover stories about climate. So, in general, we clearly think it's important, and many of us wish to know more on the subject.

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"³⁰, the question arises: How do we cover climate change in the best way?

Why we need 10 pieces of advice

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. Back in the 2000s and 2010s we would ask questions such as "can this really be true?", our generally changed perception has now led us towards the question "what do we do now?"

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 hopelessness³¹ that can even cause psychological distress, not least among young people³². Therefore, journalism needs to evolve in line with our changing perceptions.

The question is how journalism will become more adapted to the present perception of climate.

And it's not an easy task. News journalism is in a global crisis, where we generally want to pay less for more, the journalists have to publish on more platforms faster and more often than in earlier times. Hence the journalist has shorter time to do a proper work. At the same time climate is often a complex matter that needs experience and knowledge to cover, why

it is problematic that the number of journalists specialized in climate is declining³³. And as if this wasn't enough PR and a great number of diverse stakeholders from politicians to NGO's and thinktanks are playing a bigger part than 10 years ago, so journalists are navigating in a deeply politicized and polarized environment³⁴.

Happily, small changes for the better seem to be appearing in journalism³⁵.

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 problem³⁶. By trying to answer that question in journalism and finding everyday people that do something we can all 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 still need to be told, again and again, to show what is happening 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 an audience. And showing solutions by using journalism is just one of 10 points in this paper.

Why only 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 reports has shown. Hence these 10 pieces of advice are not covering the entire 'truth', but are rather an attempt to bridge scientific knowledge and journalists covering climate in a way to make the most people read about it, watch, and listen.

The scientific investigation of media coverage of climate change is not an old field of study – like for instance the studies of biodiversity or literature. Hence this paper draws upon both scientific papers on journalism as well as knowledge gathered on *communicating* about climate. Since many seem to experience 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 extracts 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, a final list of facts. Instead, it's a list of good advice resting on valid knowledge from a great many numbers of reports and scientific papers.

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