

Three Recommendations for Effective Climate Communication

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Climate change affects all, directly or indirectly. For the last half a decade, public communication about it has been framed in terms of “crisis,” “emergency,” and served the need to bring attention to the unfolding global disaster. Yet this type of anxiety-inducing discourse may not be helpful in the long run. The media needs to know how to keep audiences engaged with the story – and motivated to act upon it. The new monograph [Effective Climate Communication: Turning Eco-Anxiety into Eco-Empowerment](#) looks at the pragmatic ways to formulate climate communication for a problem that is here to stay.

1. Highlight Actionable Solutions

If you were deadly afraid of snakes, would it make you feel better if you saw someone holding one in their arms? Probably. But what if I asked *you* to hold the reptile yourself, if it were in a safe environment and with the professional available to protect you? According to a well-known [experiment](#) by the Canadian-American psychologist Albert Bandura, both approaches to snake phobia are useful to build the sense of self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s own capacity to organise and execute actions in a particular situation. To build a sense of efficacy, holding the snake yourself is even better than observing someone *else* do it.

Applying this approach to climate change means providing the audience with the action points or stories that explain what is being done or can be done to curb or mitigate climate change. The action points can be individual or collective – the important thing is to offer the implementable, actionable ideas to the audience.

Living in an age of multiple crises (or “[present shock](#)” as coined by media thinker Douglas Rushkoff), means being exposed to too many notifications and news headlines, many of them negative and overwhelming. Climate change discourse tends to be dominated by the frames of catastrophe, crisis, disaster. Even as these frames are rightfully true of many climate-related events, they can remove the audience’s sense of agency. Offering solution-oriented storytelling can empower people to make sustainable choices in their daily lives, voting

decisions, and point to the intervention points at community and national levels.

Unlike “problem journalism,” [solutions journalism](#) aims to provide not only a factual description of the problem, but include thoroughly-researched possible *solutions*. Similarly, constructive journalism presents to the audience the developments that are positive and progressive, thus addressing the negativity bias inherent in traditional news.

While [research](#) on constructive and solutions journalism reveals that they may still instill a sense of worry as they describe problems, their net benefit shows that they are worth exploring as empowering modes of climate reporting.

2. Connect Global Crises to Local Stories

Climate coverage often suffers from what I call delocalisation. There is a gap between reporting on immediate disasters and the high-level global climate change agenda, which prevents audiences from engaging with a clear understanding of the issue or better preparing for its effects within their own communities.

Delocalisation manifests in various forms around the world, with different root causes. In the Global South – which has a tendency to rely on a Global North agenda when it comes to climate reporting – a lack of resources is a common roadblock. Newsrooms often struggle to send reporters to talk to local farmers, assign journalists to investigate sustainable start-ups, or conduct data analysis of changes in local rainfall. For instance, many media outlets on the African continent (which is badly affected by climate change) [tend](#) to feature stories from the West, not from the ground. There is a documented spike of climate headlines when the new Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report is released, or a UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) is taking place.

As a result, a curious trend has [emerged](#): people in different areas each have their own definition of what “climate change” is. For a fisherman, it is the extreme, stormy weather, while for a farmer, it is the diminishing crops. While both cases are true and related to climate change, seeing how each part connects to the full picture of what climate change is – and how it affects most areas of life *locally* in a systematic manner – is [lacking](#) from African [media coverage](#). Socioeconomic differences between different African countries play a significant role in the variety and depth of coverage.

The issue of delocalisation haunts the Global North too. More effort and literacy are needed in newsrooms to attribute extreme weather events to climate change and explain local consequences to audiences. To give an example, only recently has Italian television [started](#) to distinguish between climate and weather as separate concepts. “Global, not yet local”

frames are common in the Baltic countries. Heat and climate change are not regularly linked in the coverage across the Mediterranean.

3. Promote Sustainability Through Lifestyle Journalism

Some of the above approaches, like solutions-based and constructive journalism, are purposefully aimed at investigating possible fixes to the multiple climate ills. But specific *genres* of soft news - which may not be immediately understood as climate journalism - can also empower audiences to act.

Lifestyle journalism finds its roots in consumer communication, and may be seen as less important than breaking news coverage. Yet individual-facing storytelling on things to eat, what to wear or buy, and how to travel is closely linked to individual action regarding climate change - and the establishment of climate-aware lifestyles.

For example, meat and dairy are [responsible](#) for 14.5% greenhouse-gas emissions; even though the correlation between meat consumption and climate change is the subject of [extensive news coverage](#), that reporting may not drive any actual behavioral change, which [requires](#) other factors (like cultural and socioeconomic cues) to translate to lifestyle adjustments.

“Mixed media diets,” or a hybrid of traditional media, social media, and items found through search engines and AI platforms, make it harder to predict what each person decodes about meat eating. There is strong [data](#) that British South Asian communities, for instance, are heavy meat eaters and rely on YouTube recipes and cooking shows to normalise meat consumption. [Research on](#) leading US and UK national media shows that even the publications known for extensive climate coverage sometimes fail to replicate that awareness in their lifestyle sections - for example, The New York Times and the BBC included meat in the majority of recipes.

Yet shifts *are* happening - the share of plant-based culinary concoctions is growing (now 18% at the Guardian, and 12% at the BBC). Yahoo News and Washington Post lead the green table transformation, featuring meat in less than half of all recipes published, with a quarter of their recipes being vegan.

Travel journalism can also be re-invented to be climate-friendly. Despite [instances](#) of “Last Chance tourism” and “disaster capitalism” narratives that promote visiting struggling destinations under the guise of “seeing the coral reef before it’s gone,” there are progressive ideas, too. [Suggestions](#) to travel locally, avoid long-haul flights, and not take

private jets are entering the repertoire of travel journalists.

Anthony Giddens' concept of "the politics of the personal" explains why individual lifestyle choices are important to the sense of identity. They allow one to construct the vision of oneself; what a person buys or displays is how the person wants to be seen. More research is needed on the link between consumable goods, values and actions, yet the dynamic of "action first, ideas second" is not uncommon. Katharine Hayhoe [points](#) to the examples of people who install solar panels out of economic incentives, but afterwards become climate-aware citizens thanks to that. People acquire stronger values by *doing* things that are pro-climate.

Overall, the media is just one among many factors that affect people's engagement with climate news and intention to act upon them. Yet communication is powerful, and can establish some norms and contest others; it can localise the effects of a global issue to empower people to demand action on the local level; it can bring clarity to the individual interventions that can have wider, climate-level consequences. Effective climate communication is a tool to remind citizens of the powers they hold to address climate change. Not addressing it is costly for all.