

The difference between “alarmist” and “alarming”

Interview with Maxwell Boykoff

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Maxwell (Max) Boykoff is the Director of the Environmental Studies program and is a Fellow in the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences at the University of Colorado Boulder, USA. He is one of the defining scholars on media and communication research on climate change. His early work of journalistic norms and “balance as bias” (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004) highlighted a crucial vulnerability of professional journalism in translating scientific evidence to the news and public discourse. Since then, his work has been published in the leading journals and forums of the field and has covered an impressive range of questions. Particular milestones in the journey are two books. *Who Speaks for the Climate? Making Sense of Media Reporting on Climate Change* (Boykoff, 2011) brought together analyses of journalism with insights about social media and the broader cultural politics of climate change and communication. More recently, *Creative (Climate) Communications: Productive Pathways for Science, Policy and Society* (Boykoff, 2019) dwelled more in-depth with findings and experiments on how citizens are –and could be – engaged through diverse strategies, genres, and more contextualised communication approaches. For this issue of *Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, *Media and the Climate Crisis*, Risto Kunelius and Max Boykoff had a conversation about the changes in climate communication and the lessons, obstacles, and opportunities of the past decades. Recent references to Boykoff’s more detailed work, publications, and related projects, have been added while editing the interview.

RK: If you think back to 2011, and your book, *Who Speaks for the Climate?*, what has changed during this decade in field of communication and your own thinking?

MB: Some things have certainly changed dramatically and some have stayed the same. I will take the part about what stayed the same first: we have continued to

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not meet the scale of the climate crisis. The set of intersectional challenges related to climate and the scale of our collective response do not match. That hasn't changed. We've made some progress of course, but we are still nowhere near what's needed. Related to this, the political economy of carbon-based industry has not changed. There are still destructionists, delayers, and contrarians that seek to distract us from the kind of progress that is needed.

Also, communication work on climate change still remains a huge challenge. The way we talk about the climate fundamentally shapes the way in which we engage with it: our attitudes and tensions, beliefs, perspectives, and then the way that we act and behave. The issue is still seen through the lens of left-right ideologies and politics, at least here in the United States, when we should be talking about decarbonisation for the benefit of human society and the environment.

But at the same time, some things have changed dramatically in the last ten years. One key thing since my first book was published in 2011 is the emergence of social movements. They have built tremendous political pressure – here in the United States domestically, but also around the world internationally – on the need to address this crisis and to take concerted and significant political action. A vital part of that social movement work that we can see is coming from young people today. There are now young and engaged people who have been born into a world where this has already been on the public agenda. People have been born into a world where there hasn't been a cooler-than-average month or year in their lifetime.

More specifically on communication and media, we have also seen the new developments around social media. This has democratised communication in certain important ways. I think there are positive ways of thinking about this, without losing sight of the dystopian aspects and concern about fake news and post-truth. Social movements are crucial here. Think of the youth and young people being able to provide their perspective more readily in the public arena and then being amplified through the communication networks and in mainstream arenas. There's been a lot more progress than I would've anticipated – really, a decade ago – and these movements have been at the center of this (see Boykoff, 2020).

The last thing I'll say about change is about sustainable technology in general. I had not anticipated the rapid improvements in technology that have really brought down the price of switching to renewables. I think the media have also played an important part here. Media have actually done a good job of following stories about renewable technology. Of course, there are always dangers of thinking about climate change simply as a technical exercise. We should not overlook the important cultural, political, and economic dimensions and concentrate on technical fixes. But there has been a tremendous amount of progress in terms of media coverage of those technological developments, and then possibilities that exist towards taking action in effective decarbonisation.

RK: We have framed this special issue of NJMS with the notion of "crisis", arguing that this perspective has gained more strength in recent years, perhaps

since IPCC's 1.5°C report in 2018. Media researchers have often been wary of too alarmist messaging (e.g., Boykoff & Pearman, 2019). How do you think of the benefits and costs of the "crisis" talk?

MB: Well, let me start by saying that there is a distinction – and I think an important one – between being alarmist and recognising that these are genuinely alarming times. There's a lot of social science research and humanities scholarship that I have tried to capture in the more recent book on *Creative (Climate) Communications* (Boykoff, 2019) to discuss when can alarming stories and discussions be productive – and when might they be less productive.

There has been a lot of research that's gone into asking this. Many times this is dependent upon starting with the audience and the context in which we communicate. As we are increasingly accepting that climate change is *here* and already a part of our individual and collective daily lives *now*, there are many audiences that are finding this recognition that we are in a climate crisis, and that urgent action is needed resonates for them. But not everything works for everyone, and that's really part of the point of my argument and the message of the book. Climate communication needs to have multiple strategies, styles, and platforms – and an awareness of how they are related. At times, alarming language can raise awareness – but we know from research that it can also make people feel overwhelmed. Alarming messages can also make people feel disengaged from a sense of global citizenry because they feel as though they don't have agency, no sense of how we can take. In climate communication, it is essential to be conscious of one's intended or actual audiences. But in addition to this, it is also crucial to be aware of how we respond to the reactions that our messaging gives rise to.

In climate communication and media coverage, then, it is important to tether climate discussion to things that bring us together. One example of this would be 2020–2021, when we've been experiencing a global pandemic. It has really forced us to collectively reconsider what our priorities are and how we live on a finite planet with finite resources. Experiences like this can come into play and can help us rethink to what extent urgent action is needed on climate change. They can also help us think how and to what extent our communications are productive – or not.

RK: Given the complexity of climate science, it is not a surprise that communicating scientific understanding not just to the public, but also to policy actors and networks, has been a challenge. In your latest book, you write critically also about the way the IPCC has still been somewhat stuck with the old "information deficit" model. How do you see the progress in the science communication front?

MB: I was actually invited as a contributing author to the 6th assessment report under preparation now (IPCC, 2021). I have contributed to a section on media, and several sections that then feed into discussions around policy. After some thought and consideration, I made a decision that accepting this invitation provided an

opportunity to reshape some of the work coming out of the IPCC. I was hoping to help us better understand the complex web of interactions that make climate communication what it is – rather than just see science as an input into the policy sphere to make the “right decision”. It remains to be seen how much progress I helped make in those areas as the report is introduced to the world beginning August 2021 (working group 1), to February and March 2022 (working groups 2 and 4) and September 2022 (the synthesis report. It’s now under review. As part of this process, some of my original contributions to working group 3 and possibly to the synthesis report may be tempered a little bit, to my dissatisfaction – but overall, I hope that it can still help us make some progress in overcoming that information deficit model.

But to your larger point about science communication, I think a broad community of scholars have been successful in making progress to overcome that. Of course, there are plenty of people in the research communities and scientific world that fall back into a deficit model because it can be comfortable. It can be a way to protect their own legitimacy or their own standing as an expert in the public arena. But increasingly, policy decision-makers and researchers understand that we need to be thinking about this as webs of feedback loops and dialogue and listening to one another. So, I think there has been progress made in these areas.

There are always those moments where we can fall back. But I do think that if we’re discussing media coverage of climate change and global warming over the last decades, the types of stories that are told have certainly expanded. There’s been this expansion of discussions and many more themes than we’ve seen before. Understanding the cultural component of communication has certainly been important in the last decade. We now see better that one need not have an advanced degree – a PhD or anything like that – to have a valuable perspective that media are willing to portray or represent. I do think that has been a source of progress.

RK: You already mentioned the role of different kinds of audiences and the fact that climate change has become an integral part of other cultural and political debates – sometimes also polarising the discussion environment. Do you think there is a specific contribution that communication and media scholars could offer to this dilemma?

MB: I think there are many things that communication scholars ought to be doing. I also think we all ought not do the *same thing*. We can continue to make progress as a community on several fronts. One essential frontier is to engage creatively in new ways of meeting people *where they are*. We have to find new inroads to discuss *really what’s at stake* for people in different moments, in different contexts. We have to learn to engage with the causes and consequences of the meaningful problems and choices people face – sometimes without having to explicitly mention the climate and climate change, or at least without leading these things as discussions about the climate.

We can feed into the broader climate debate through a variety of other intersectional, interrelated challenges. For instance, in terms of challenges, we could think about *security* – global security, energy security, and so on – and open up a conversation that way. Or we could talk about people’s *aspirations*: what kind of legacy do we want to leave for children and grandchildren and our communities on this planet. Because of the intersectional nature of climate change we just don’t always have to be *leading* with conversations about climate change but approach it through other issues. As a community of scholars, there are many *different* ways in which we can continue to advance our assessments of what’s effective: how to be effective and when, what is effective under what circumstances, and how is that different with different groups (see Boykoff & Oonk, 2020).

Then we can also continue to advance the core of our efforts, as you mentioned. We have recognised since the 1950s that, largely, the information deficit model is dead – but is still moves on. So, there’s an important subset of work continuing to remind us about this. Even when we feel we have talked about it so many times, repetition of these lessons remains critically important. Media coverage is a way to scale up those communications, as is working with policy actors and other influential and often trusted public figures.

RK: Let’s try to elaborate this a bit more. I am going to end by asking you to highlight a couple of inspiring examples of communication research on climate change?

MB: I’ve been pleased to see all the different ways in which people are trying to make progress: providing inroads, finding common ground, bridging between groups and individuals that may not be engaged and trying increase engagement. I can give you a couple of examples out of many, but maybe across the spectrum.

At times, it can be difficult to capture the fundamental political economic challenge of carbon-based industry. I think there have been some really effective groups that have been coming together here. A particularly impressive example would be the founding and development of a Climate Social Science Network (2021) hosted at the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society (Brown University, 2021). They have been working to bring together researchers to address different components of the base industry activity. This work can be assessing the activities of certain right-wing networks that can undermine progress in these areas; but is can also be looking directly at media representations and how that affects our efforts to decarbonise. This is a really exciting project in contemporary political economic and cultural spaces.

At the risk of maybe talking about something that I’ve been involved in myself, I will mention a team of people here at the University of Colorado Boulder. Professor Beth Osnes is a Theatre professor, and – with Communication professor Phaedra Pezzullo and Ecology & Evolutionary Biology professor Becca Safran – we have been running a project called Inside the Greenhouse (2021a). We teach courses here, and we try to provide this experimental space for creatively com-

municating about climate change. We’ve had a project specifically around using *comedy* as a vehicle for communicating about climate change and to increase engagement and action. In the pandemic, we just finished up working with students and they released a show, *Earth Day (Inside the Greenhouse, 2021b)*.

This year, we partnered with Chuck Nice who’s a professional comedian – he’s co-host of *StarTalk* with Neil de Grasse Tyson – and we recruited 15 working professional comedians to work with our students this semester. We had 44 students, and we had invited the comedians in to find the funny in climate change without trivialising critically important issues. We also asked them to tether to Project Drawdown (2021), which highlights a set of achievable solutions from the individual to the collective (see also Boykoff & Osnes, 2019; Osnes et al., 2019).

And it was a really fun experiment. We’ve been involved in this now for six years, and we’ve been researching and writing about it, and we’ve been finding that it actually is a really good way to reframe conversations about climate change. And at times, we can find common ground. At other times, there is that satirical punching up of authority or punching at the other. There’s all these different flavours of comedy. We found it to be really resonant in providing spaces for the empowerment of younger people and our students who are becoming themselves climate communicators. Of the comedians that we’ve been working with, where we actually asked them after our show, the majority of them have said that they’re going to continue to include elements of climate change in ongoing comedy sets. Even with Chuck Nice, who’s an accomplished comedian and public personality already. I just talked with him yesterday, and he’s thinking of developing a new project, something like a climate call-in show where people can make requests for what they want to learn about climate change, and then he’ll provide a comedic answer to those questions. It’s just a different way for people who won’t be picking up the IPCC report. They may not pick up my academic book. But we can find another way in, and people can share this with each other and have a laugh – as they at the same time actually get some serious insights.

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