

Limited visions of the future: How journalists envision and report on our future with climate change

Journalism is not in the business of forecasting but about reporting on current events. Yet, in a global risk society (Beck 1996), considerations about the future, particularly concerning ecological crises, have gained relevance also for journalism. Imagining not only how to avert crisis, but even envisioning a good future life may become part of journalistic practice (Brüggemann et al. 2022).

Particularly concerning climate change, journalism, arguably, has to engage with the future as *climate research* is, often, based on modelling future climate change. How journalists envision and report on our future with climate change, is the topic of our presentation.

Imaginations about the future (“present futures” (Luhmann 1976) have an impact on our current actions and thus on actual living conditions in the future (“future presents”, Luhmann, 1976). For instance, imaginaries of a global doom are found to be paralyzing rather than mobilizing action (O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009) – even though fear appeals *do* mobilize actions, under certain circumstances (Hornsey and Fielding 2020).

There are only a few studies that focus on the journalistic reporting of climate futures (e.g., Fløttum et al., 2014; Foust & O’Shannon Murphy, 2009; Hellsten et al., 2014; Kumpu, 2013) and most distinguish only very roughly between positive and negative outlooks.

Different visions of our future with climate change can be understood and analyzed as frames, defined as “interpretive packages” (Gamson and Modigliani 1989), including problem definitions, causal attributions, treatment recommendations, and (moral) evaluations (Entman 1993) as well as factual assumptions about the future.

This submission represents the synthesis of a research program into media constructions of climate futures. It includes content analyses covering journalistic coverage in countries from the Global North and the Global South (Germany, India, South Africa, and the United States). A qualitative long-term study of news magazine coverage ($N = 62$; 1980–2019) is complemented with a quantitative content analysis of online and print news representing news outlets with different audiences (national, local, elite, popular) ($N = 1.010$; 2017–2020).

We find that journalism follows the approach of climate science and focusses, similar across countries and outlets, on distant, negative futures. Four frames can be distinguished: The most important being a *Distant Risks of Climate Change Frame*. Extremely negative scenarios dominate the *Global Doom* frame. More concrete is the *Local Tragedies* frame and a more recent *Sustainable Innovation* frame.

What is lacking is a *Great Transformation* frame, that would envision substantial changes in society. While this is debated in academia, journalists do not seem to engage with this. To understand the limited vision of reporting, we have also conducted two interview studies with journalists, exploring the cognitive frames relating to climate futures. Traditional role perceptions of the neutral observer and a lack of resources limit the imagination of climate journalism in practice. Changes towards proactive transformative and constructive journalism do exist in the minds of journalists but do not yet translate into strong patterns of coverage.

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