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Media and climate justice: what space for alternative discourses?

Injustice and awareness

As put by one of the most prominent and vocal climate researchers, climate change is, profoundly, an ethical issue. 'Today's changes of atmospheric composition', James Hansen and colleagues write, 'will be felt most by today's young people and the unborn (…) who currently depend on others who make decisions today that have consequences over future decades and centuries' (Hansen et al. 2011: 22). Awareness is a game-changer in determining the moral (un)acceptability of this and other forms of injustice (e.g. international, inter-class) embedded in climate change: 'Our parents honestly did not know that their actions could harm future generations. We, the current generation, can only pretend that we did not know.' (ibid.).

Surveys conducted around the world show that most people are indeed aware of climate change and multiple studies suggest that this is largely due to the media. From this perspective, the media are crucial to generating shared views on climate-related injustice. Although some studies suggest that citizens are indeed concerned with issues of injustice in climate-related matters (McLaren et al. 2016), it is not known how widespread such feelings are and how much they weigh on (individual) decisions. Obviously, there are multiple factors at play but the discourses that the dominant media have co-constructed in the last few decades are a key factor for social representations. At the same time, a growing number of social movements struggling for climate justice have been using various communication tools, including 'alternative media', to disseminate counter-hegemonic views.

The importance of the media for the definition of the meanings of climate change derives from the place they occupy in current-day public spheres. News media, specifically, are a crucial space for the amplification of the viewpoints and

arguments advanced by multiple social actors as well as a key agent in the construction of discourses in their own right. However, a few words of caution are due on what is meant by 'the media'. Firstly, although many reflections on the social and political roles of media discourse speak of the media as a unitary and homogeneous body, it is necessary to differentiate between the numerous, and profoundly diverse, institutions that make up 'the media'. Their goals, audiences and channels, to name just a few aspects, vary widely and the range of 'alternative media' projects that have been developing in the last few decades is evidence of increasing pluralism despite a simultaneous tendency for concentration of property. The second caveat is that the vast majority of extant research is on 'Western' countries, particularly in Europe and North America, whereas there are nearly no studies on the countries most vulnerable to climate change (Schäfer & Schlichting 2014). It should also be noted that over two-thirds of research has focused on print media, whereas television, radio, and internet-based media have gotten much less attention until very recently. The trends reported here draw on such published research and therefore only yield light on a small part of the world media landscape. Thirdly, news and journalism, although the main focus of this chapter, are not the only modes of mediated communication that have 'political' meaning and that shape understandings of the world. Instead, citizens make sense of social and political reality through a profusion of media and types of content. Films, video games and documentaries are among the formats shown to have played a role in relation to views on climate change (e.g. Lowe et al., 2006). Finally, whereas so-called 'social media' have generated much enthusiasm in some circles, it has also been shown that they often operate as echo-chambers for the 'mainstream media' on climate change and other issues (Kirilenko & Stepchenkova 2014), and in some cases have mined the efficacy of movement communication (Poell & van Dijck 2015).

Reinforcing the 'order of things'

Dominant media(ted) discourses on climate change have reinforced rather than challenged the order of political, economic and social things. Drawing on Foucault (2002), I argue that the mainstream media have contributed to create a system of intelligibility – an episteme or way of knowing climate change – that allows

for the reproduction of current practices and the continuation of certain types of political and economic structures. Mainstream media have some common traits such as large audiences, a commercial orientation, and a degree of proximity to official sources. Ideological cultures in the media can, of course, be significantly different, each with varying implications for how climate science and politics are represented (Carvalho 2007). But even the most progressive of dominant media build on certain – seemingly unquestionable – ideas that are at the foundation of climate injustice, namely the metadiscourses of free market economy and elite policy-making, both underpinned by the metadiscourse of techno-scientific progress. The naturalization of such metadiscourses results from various interconnected journalistic choices, which, together with other problematic aspects in media practice, contribute to keeping societies locked into systems that produce inequality.

Firstly, mainstream media have reproduced and endorsed the views of the most powerful actors in the political and economic spheres. They have typically ignored - and sometimes even discredited and de-authorized - social actors who challenge dominant value-systems. Several studies have shown that governments and intergovernmental organizations have strongly shaped media agendas with peaks in media attention in multiple countries having coincided with intergovernmental summits (e.g. Sampei and Aoyagi-Usui 2009). Governmental sources have been dominant in numerous contexts (e.g. Yun et al. 2012) while actors from the civil society have been routinely silenced.

Secondly, several media outlets, such as Fox News in the USA, the *Daily Telegraph* in the UK, and *The Australian,* have chosen to offer a stage for denialist views on climate change thereby precluding a healthy and informed discussion on injustice or on courses of action towards a more equitable and sustainable future. Painter (2011) and others have shown that this is mostly an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon with media in the US, Australia and the UK being particularly prone to featuring denialists. Fossil-fuel lobbies exacerbate the problem. The extent of the impact of the skeptic movement's public relations campaigns (led by wealthy think tanks and foundations, such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heartland Institute) on American media cannot be overestimated, raising issues of representational equity and casting a shadow on the 'public sphere' as a democratic

'discursive space'. It must be noted, however, that in many other parts of the world, the media tend to adhere to scientific findings on anthropogenic climate change (Painter 2011).

Thirdly, the discourses that have tended to gain currency in mainstream media stay within the parameters of governance models that produce climate injustice. In-depth discourse analyses of media coverage have pointed to a frequent reproduction and legitimation of governmental discourses promoting techno-managerial approaches and to the marginalization of more transformative discourses (Carvalho 2011). The media do not function in a void. Social and political contexts and powerful institutions exert a strong influence on news reporting. Indeed, multiple discursive practices outside the media have contributed to the reduction of public debate on climate change. Already a decade and a half ago, Adger et al. (2001: 681) argued that a 'global environmental management discourse representing a technocentric worldview by which blueprints based on external policy interventions can solve global environmental dilemmas' was dominant not only in climate change but also in the politics of deforestation, desertification, and biodiversity. How formal political bodies, given their privileged positions of power, frame the issue is key to its wider circulation. International organizations, such as the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank (Methmann 2010), and governmental leaders (Carvalho 2005), amongst others, have appropriated climate change in ways that serve the agenda of continuous economic growth with strong repercussions in media discourses (ibid.). The power relations that shape possible responses to climate change are absent from most media debates (although some exceptions should be noted, such as the fossil fuel divestment campaign led by the *Guardian*). Indeed, several scholars have argued that climate change is dominated by a 'post-political' consensus (e.g. Swyngedouw 2010), with power issues, value assumptions, and choices being concealed. Expert-dominated consensus forecloses debate and obscures injustice.

Fourthly, there is a general tendency to suppress the ethical dimensions of climate change in mainstream media discourses. Research on the British press indicates that climate change is predominantly framed in terms that omit multiple ethical issues with presumptions of unlimited consumption and continuous

economic growth, for instance, remaining unchallenged (Carvalho 2005). Given the media's ultra-reliance on top political actors, this trend may be fed by politicians' silence on moral and ethical elements, as Gurney (2013) found in Australia.

A recent study of press constructions of climate justice pointed to striking differences between the US, India, and Germany (Schmidt and Schäfer, 2015). Despite large variations between media outlets, a 'freedom and resilience' pattern (privileging individual freedom and resourcefulness) was more commonly found in the US than in the two other countries. Taking into account the representation of the views of different social groups in the US press, Schmidt and Schäfer (2015) argued that:

> In general, the compatibility of climate governance with market principles and the competitiveness of American industries, including effects on employment, are major concerns across all stakeholder groups. Only few references to "international solidarity" advance a different perspective, but they stem almost exclusively from foreigners. (id.: 545)

In Germany, the study found mostly a 'post-materialist debate on how to best protect values like environmental sensitivity and responsibility for distant others' (ibid.) whereas a postcolonial narrative (underscoring the right to economic and social development) was dominant in India (Schmidt and Schäfer 2015). Across the three countries, there was a pervasive nation-centric view of climate change and of options for action. While we should be wary of homogenizing analyses of mainstream media discourses and avoid reifying the mainstream-alternative dualism, it is fair to say that most dominant media have helped produce consent towards elite/technocratic decision-making and free-market capitalism, and steered well away from proposals based on climate justice principles, such as fairness in the international distribution of commitments based on emissions per capita and historical responsibility.

Alternative constructions of climate change: accounting for plurality and climate justice

In contrast with the above, 'alternative media' have been developing discourses that provide a different system of intelligibility (or 'ways of knowing' climate change)

and promote distinct political subjectivities, thus offering a new hope for climate justice.

Atkinson and Dougherty (2006: 65) define alternative media as 'any media that are produced by non-commercial sources and that attempt to transform existing social roles and practices by critiquing and challenging power structures'. Although other scholars speak of different defining traits of alternative/independent/community media, overt engagement with social and political causes seems to be a common one. For example, *Democracy Now!* has remained committed to amplifying resistance to the construction of a major pipeline at Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota led by indigenous people and a wider social/environmental movement (e.g. Democracy Now! 2016a, b & c). Hackett (2016: 14) has argued that the 'most critical (in both senses of the term) functions' of alternative media are 'counter-narrativity' and the 'formation and mobilization of counter-publics'. Here is how he envisages the former:

> 'Counternarrativity entails filling in the gaps of dominant media accounts, finding the excluded voices and the dissonant facts that don't fit the official version, challenging repressive frames, providing new ways of making sense of contentious events and bringing attention to events and issues marginalised in the dominant media's topic agenda.' (ibid.)

Research on alternative media discourses on the environment and climate change is sparse but offers important insight on possibilities for counter-narratives. Comparing mainstream and alternative media coverage of metallic mining in El Salvador, Hopke (2012) concludes that the latter reframed the issue in terms of community rights and environmental justice. Similarly, Gunster (2012) analysed two independent newspapers in Canada and found a significant emphasis on successful cases of action to mitigate climate change, which could act as exemplars for governments in enhancing civic pressure. He showed that political acts such as demonstrations, sit-ins and letter-writing campaigns were awarded much more space and salience than in the corporate media thereby opening up the politics of climate change to other actors. Examining several alternative Australian publications, Foxwell-Norton (2017) also found a critique of the politics of climate

change, regular inclusion of voices that are otherwise marginalized and an incitement to citizen action.

In an analysis of the claims of global movements for environmental justice, Schlosberg (2004) called attention to recognition as an integral part of the notion of justice and maintained that acknowledging and valuing diverse social groups, identities and cultural practices is key to democratic environmental politics. As we have seen, strong roots of injustice grow in the dominant communication grounds/spaces through reproduction, naturalization, and legitimation of a narrow set of voices and discourses. To the extent that they offer discourses that are critical of hegemony and oppression, and pursue a politics of recognition (Fraser, 1995) a more just future could be imagined in the horizon through alternative journalistic/communicative practices.

Such alternative journalism implicates news work and media organizations at multiple levels, including the all-important issue of funding (with several alternatives to corporate sources being experimented). While there is no single 'recipe', journalism for climate justice thoroughly addresses inequities and suffering, as well as responsibility and agency, and sheds light on how societies can move forward towards sustainable futures. It puts a strong focus on those taking the brunt of climate change impacts, not only showing their condition but also discussing their rights, and constituting them into important political subjects in relation to climate change. It makes the sources of greenhouse gas emissions explicit: who, where and how much are important questions to increase accountability and enable action. Enhancing citizens' sense of agency in climate politics can benefit from awarding visibility to and discussing possibilities of activism (Cross et al. 2015) and other forms of political engagement. Most importantly, climate justice-oriented media give more space to thoroughly transformative proposals to address climate change and its systemic causes, and contribute to repoliticizing climate change by promoting plural debate and open confrontation of ideas (Carvalho, van Wessel and Maeseele 2017).

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