

What should be the roles and responsibilities of Australian media in reporting on and responding to the real-life impacts of climate change?

**By Grace Jennings-Edquist**

I'm Grace, I'm a journalist, and I've largely failed to report on climate change and its real-life impacts.

It's shameful to admit this, of course. Like most journalists, I was drawn to this field with noble intentions: To hold the powerful to account and drive positive change.

In reality, my first digital news job involved churning out five online articles a day with salacious headlines, propelled by a funding model that relied on maximum clicks to attract advertisers. Nobody in the office was specifically trained in science reporting. Our bosses insisted audiences didn't care about climate change: it was deemed too gloomy, too dull, not relevant to our audiences' everyday lives.

So, while the world warmed around me, I spent several years in an air-conditioned office, reporting on local crime and wellbeing trends instead.

I'm not sharing this as a form of self-flagellation, nor to make excuses. I'm admitting my part in the problem because it's time Australian media recognises the way it reports on climate change is broken. This issue is linked inextricably to uncertain funding models, concentrated media ownership, the emergence of social media and other new technologies, and the proliferation of disinformation online.

## Back to basics: What is the media's job?

Coming to grips with how we can do better as journalists begins with revisiting the basic roles and responsibilities of the Australian media.

In the simplest terms, the media's role is to inform the public of verified facts that are relevant to the public interest.

Executing this role involves various tasks: questioning authorities, translating complicated research papers into plain language for public consumption,<sup>i</sup> determining which facts are in the public interest (rather than merely of interest to the public),<sup>ii</sup> and keeping communities informed during emergencies.<sup>iii</sup>

But perhaps most fundamentally, the media's role involves holding the powerful to account.<sup>iv</sup>

It's often said that a free, independent press is key to a healthy democracy.<sup>v</sup> Indeed, the media's role is sometimes referred to as that of "the fourth estate" — an entity charged with monitoring other branches of government and society. Essentially, the press serves as a guardian of the public interest, and as a watchdog in the framing of political issues. The information it shares with its audiences allows them to make educated choices,<sup>vi</sup> including voting.<sup>vii</sup>

Crucially, the media cannot execute its role as watchdog if influenced by external influences. Thus, the media's first responsibility is to the public — and this responsibility "takes precedence over any other responsibility, in particular towards their employers and the public authorities", as the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists by the International Federation of Journalists makes clear.<sup>viii</sup>

In recognition of the importance of this watchdog role, press freedom has been codified in various laws for more than 250 years — with Sweden becoming the first country to pass a law supporting the freedom of the press back in 1766.<sup>ix</sup> The United Nations,

Reporters Without Borders, and various national laws and international treaties all protect and reinforce the importance of an independent, unbiased media.

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Applying these principles in the context of climate change, the Australian media's roles and responsibilities should be unambiguous: the media should act impartially and independently to report only verified facts about climate change and its impacts, since those facts are clearly in the public interest.

It should hold to account powerful stakeholders contributing to climate change and its worst impacts; keep communities informed of the risks posed by climate change; and translate scientific research on the topic into accessible language.

It should make clear that climate change is the defining issue of our time — more dangerous to human life, and to the health of the planet, than the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis in Gaza, conflict between nuclear powers, or any single election. It has been listed as one of the top risks facing humanity by both the World Health Organization and the World Economic Forum.<sup>x</sup> Already, it is directly contributing to humanitarian emergencies: from heatwaves, to bushfires, floods and tropical cyclones. These extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and intensity and are projected to become more catastrophic.<sup>xi</sup> Climate change may, in time, wipe out the human race.<sup>xii</sup>

If the media carried out its roles and responsibilities to the letter, climate change would be the leading news story each day: above the fold, top of the bulletin, first line in the digital newsletter. But in reality, as we know, this is not what happens.

### **Where we've gone wrong**

Unearthing some solutions to better climate reporting begins with being honest about where, and why, we've gone wrong.

And gone wrong we have. In August 2024, a group of researchers concluded that Australian journalists have “overwhelmingly failed” to report on climate change in a way that benefits society.<sup>xiii</sup> After analysing 180,000 articles about climate change published over 30 years, the multidisciplinary scholars — gathered by RMIT’s Innovation Catalyst — found that Australian journalists had focused on specific issues impacting powerful groups, while under-reporting climate change’s impacts on everyday Australians.<sup>xiv</sup>

### We only cover specific parts of the issue

One key issue is that journalists tend to report just a thin slice of the climate change issue.

Much Australian media coverage of the issue focuses on political debates about climate policy and climate denialism, the analysis by RMIT’s Innovation Catalyst found.<sup>xv</sup> A disproportionate number of articles focused on coal mining, according to the study, which used machine learning techniques to examine articles about climate change and related environmental issues. This may indicate that Australian news articles about climate change focus on narratives “that serve the needs of the powerful and significantly distract from critical policy and social issues that affect ordinary Australians,” as one of the report’s author’s wrote for *Crikey*.<sup>xvi</sup>

In contrast, solutions to climate issues (for example, initiatives that encourage recycling or reuse of products) were covered far less in that same 30-year period, the analysis found.

A similar issue exists with respect to the types of scientific research that journalists cover, researchers at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland concluded in a separate study.<sup>xvii</sup> That research analysed 51,230 scientific articles to see which topics were covered across more than 5,000 media outlets in 2020. It revealed that journalists reported on climate-related research in the natural sciences significantly more often than on research into the social, economic, and technological aspects of climate change. Journalists also reported

on natural sciences research far more than research into the effectiveness of potential solutions, the study discovered.

One troubling impact of this selective focus, according to study co-author Marie-Elodie Perga, is that readers are consequently most likely to hear about studies that lead to fear and paralysis. By reporting on this narrow aspect of climate change science, we miss the “psychological triggers for behaviour change” that may help prompt climate action or inspire solutions, Perga and her co-authors explain.<sup>xviii</sup>

### We don't connect the dots

Australian media coverage also fails to explain connections between climate change and other events. Whether they're explaining biodiversity loss,<sup>xix</sup> describing coral bleaching on the Great Barrier Reef, or reporting an increase in farmer suicides following drought, news articles often fail to draw relevant links to climate change.<sup>xx</sup> Similarly, journalists often miss opportunities to connect the dots between climate change and “major election issues including health, economics and foreign policy,” journalist Lyndal Rowlands has written.<sup>xxi</sup>

The media often omits any mention of climate change when reporting on individual extreme weather events, too.<sup>xxii</sup> Associate Professor Jill Hopke, of DePaul University in the United States, studied news coverage of heatwaves over a six-year period from 2013 to 2018. Her research found that articles by generalist news outlets mentioned climate issues in just 17 percent of stories about heatwaves. Climate specialist media outlets, by contrast, mentioned climate issues 41 percent of the time.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### We overlook how climate change impacts the most vulnerable

The groups most impacted by the worst effects of climate change are too often neglected in Australian media coverage.

For example, research shows women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change and extreme weather events — but most

climate news stories in Australia are created by men, and featured men as sources more than women, the RMIT's Innovation Catalyst team found. This is despite women having outnumbered men in the Australian journalism profession since 2015.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Other groups that are especially vulnerable to climate change (generally, those who are economically, culturally, politically, institutionally or otherwise marginalised) appear similarly under-represented in climate reporting. This includes the elderly, people with disabilities, young people, LGBTQI folks, and Indigenous populations.<sup>xxv</sup> Australian media articles consistently and disproportionately feature not only male voices but middle-income earners,<sup>xxvi</sup> while under-representing First Nations voices,<sup>xxvii</sup> as well as people with disability.<sup>xxviii</sup> In doing so, it misses opportunities to shine a light on some of the most pressing real-life impacts of climate change.

This issue may be driven, in part, by journalism becoming a profession for only “the wealthy and connected,”<sup>xxix</sup> or the “pale, male and posh”<sup>xxx</sup> over the last several decades. As poor wages and unpaid internship requirements push journalism careers increasingly out of reach of anyone without inherited wealth, the resulting over-representation of relatively well-off managing editors can impede some newsrooms’ ability to represent concerns of the wider public.

### Concentrated media ownership and the influence of commercial interests

Australia’s media landscape is comprised mainly of private mainstream outlets, which produce content for ratings and profits. These commercial news outlets are notionally bound by the same roles and responsibilities captured in the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists and other codes of professional standards. However, unlike Australia’s two public broadcasters, in reality these outlets answer to commercial sponsors.<sup>xxxi</sup> This can influence the way key social, political and environmental issues including climate change are reported.

This issue is particularly potent because Australia has the second-highest media concentration in the world.<sup>xxxii</sup> The vast majority of major metropolitan newspapers in Australia are owned by News Limited, a subsidiary of News Corporation, or Nine Entertainment Co; all are owned by the Murdoch family.

The media empire's patriarch — media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, who stepped down as chairman of News Corp and Fox Corp in 2023 — has significant interests in the fossil fuels industry.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Described as a “climate villain” by some scientists, Murdoch has used his many media outlets to delay climate action and promote climate denial.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In the words of climate scientist Dr Joëlle Gergis, because of the Murdoch press “[w]e have wasted decades debating the fundamental science in the media, when we really should have been focused on urgently implementing climate policies that will genuinely reduce emissions.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

The RMIT's Innovation Catalyst report appears to back these claims, finding that climate denialism has taken up “a significant part of the media discourse”<sup>xxxvi</sup> since the 1990s.<sup>xxxvii</sup> A 2021 study of 55 publications owned by the Murdoch family found, similarly, that “for more than the past two decades, 45 per cent of Murdoch media climate coverage and references have been at least sceptical or at worst outright denial of the phenomenon happening all around us,” as investigative journalist Wendy Bacon put it.<sup>xxxviii</sup> That's consistent with an earlier study's finding that one-third of Australian media coverage of climate change “included climate denialist views” – with News Corp outlets being the key reason, according to researchers at the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism.<sup>xxxix</sup>

While News Corp did adopt a new climate strategy in 2021, outwardly pivoting away from climate denialism, its more recent climate content has nevertheless perpetuated old narratives: framing renewables as an unreliable source of energy and criticising a carbon pollution price, for example.<sup>xl</sup>

Commercial media in Australia has also sometimes debated some of the core role and responsibilities of the media defined above, or re-defined terms to suit their agendas. For example, the very notion of what counts as “independent” media is contested: some commercial media players have attempted, for many years, to reframe the distinction between commercial and public service media as a choice between “independent” and “state” media.<sup>xli</sup>

### The social media conundrum

A new era of technological advances has shaken up the media landscape in recent years. With the emergence of social media, search engines and news aggregators, anyone with an internet connection to share news and information.

In certain ways, social media platforms including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram can said to serve a democratic purpose – affording typically disenfranchised groups a voice, which can help set editorial agendas that consider the interests of typically marginalised groups. Importantly, these platforms allow “citizen journalists” to share perspectives from local events, as we have seen in Gaza recently.

But in other pivotal ways, social media threatens typical notions of journalistic ethics. The extent to which these new players in the media space should be bound by the roles and responsibilities of traditional media outlets is contested. As journalist and academic Margaret Simons wrote in 2021: “It is hard to discern any consistent journalistic principles guiding the conduct of media professionals on social media.” That statement rings true, still, today.

To some extent, social media is a modern-day equivalent of the “Wild, Wild West”, as journalist Laura Collins of the Yorkshire Evening Post has described it.<sup>xlii</sup> Content-makers on these platforms often lack the training, commitment to accuracy and impartiality expected of professional journalists. Of particular concern is the proliferation of misinformation spread by social media. As the 2016 US



election revealed, social media platforms are either unequipped or unprepared to enact clear moderation policies to curb the spread of misinformation.<sup>xliii</sup>

The design and purpose of social media platforms, too, is at odds with journalistic standards and ethics. These platforms are designed to retain users by showing them content that an algorithm suggests based on their interest and popularity, rather than on accuracy.

In contrast to the traditional news media model — where a trained editor generally selects key stories of the day and sets a news agenda that includes a broad range of topics — social media news feeds serve readers a selective, narrow range of content tailored to each user’s interests, and based on what they have previously engaged with. This model can cause an “echo chamber effect”, where readers mainly encounter perspectives that reinforce their existing views. This model flies in the face of traditional understandings of media’s responsibilities around providing editorial balance. By facilitating unchecked falsities, these social media platforms can undermine responsible reporting on issues including climate change. In this way, ideological extremists and partisans can weaponise new communication technologies to attack democratic principles associated with journalistic integrity.<sup>xliv</sup>

### Broken funding models and widespread job losses

Perhaps one of the most pernicious factors preventing best-practice climate change reporting in Australia is the emergence of digital media, with its reliance on page views for advertiser revenue, and ongoing uncertainty about financially viable business models across the media ecosystem in general. With the rise of digital media, traditional or “legacy” media have suffered a loss of reach and revenue – and the decline of legacy media has particularly impacted reporting about science and the environment, as researchers have concluded.<sup>xlv</sup>

In short, the media sphere is now “dominated by clickbait, algorithms, and manufactured anger.”<sup>xlvi</sup> In this new media landscape,

news websites like the one I worked for fresh out of journalism school rely on attracting massive amounts of page views. It's a game of quantity, not quality – and it incentivises journalists to bash out as many short, easy-to-grasp stories as possible. There is very little impetus for a reporter in such a newsroom to cover climate change stories in great detail; I have seen pitches on climate stories quickly shot down by editors who deem the topic “not clicky enough,” “too far away,” or “not relevant to our readers’ lives.”

This is bad news for responsible climate change journalism. Indeed, as environmental journalist and founding director of the new Initiative on Communication and Sustainability at Columbia University's Earth Institute, Andrew Revkin, once put it: “if clicks are the metric of success in environmental journalism, then, we're kind of doomed.”<sup>xlvii</sup>

The emergence of digital media has fostered a new mode of media consumption. It is characterised by short articles to cater to readers' increasingly short attention spans. The consensus from managing editors I've known seems to be that there is little audience appetite for longform stories. Nor is there much funding for longform, collaborative investigative stories in Australia (although in a few select countries, such as the United States, philanthropic ventures still fund this kind of in-depth cross-newsroom journalism.)

Some digital newsrooms cover sustainability and climate issues through a lens of lifestyle journalism: ABC Everyday, where I worked as a reporter for several years, often ran stories on how individual readers or families could reduce their carbon footprint. But as news organisations tighten their belts, not many newsrooms have dedicated climate editors or climate reporters.

On the contrary: round after round of media redundancies – especially in regional areas – has led to a complete absence of local journalists in some parts of Australia. There is, quite simply, nobody on the ground to report on the real-life impacts of climate change in many parts of Australia.

## Public broadcasters aren't immune from climate reporting challenges

Even public media is not free from allegations of outside influence and bias.

Australia's two public media organisations — the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) — are free of commercial influence. They are, instead accountable to the Australian public that fund them, and are also required to reflect the Australian public: The ABC's charter requires the broadcaster to represent the Australian public in its diversity,<sup>xlviii</sup> while SBS's stated purpose involves informing, educating and entertaining all Australians and, in doing so, reflecting Australia's multicultural society.<sup>xlix</sup>

The mandate of public media organisations generally sit quite comfortably with the roles and responsibilities of a free press. Research has even found that countries with public broadcasting systems consistently have stronger democracies.<sup>1</sup>

But public broadcasters are not free of their own issues when covering climate change. In the UK, the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) has previously been criticised for "false balance" after it gave political opinions about climate change and scientific fact the same weight in news coverage.<sup>li</sup>

Closer to home, the ABC and SBS have avoided that charge in relation to climate change (the ABC's stated editorial position is to not platform climate deniers.)

Nevertheless, the ABC has previously been found to have not covered climate change adequately; a report for the Australian Conservation Foundation found in 2020 that the ABC's 7.30 and AM programs did not adequately cover climate change, and that its related reports on drought, bushfire, fossil fuel extraction, and energy policy ignored climate change as a causative factor.<sup>lii</sup>

While not as pernicious as the Murdoch media's history of platforming climate denialism, this example serves as a warning: Even publicly funded media, which normally aligns most closely with democratic notions of journalistic integrity, has erred in its coverage of climate change on occasion.

### **Where to from here?**

For Australian media to better fulfil its roles and responsibilities in covering climate change and its impacts, substantial changes are needed.

Some will take time, government intervention, and political will to remedy. For example, diversification of media ownership is an ongoing issue that may require a multi-pronged solution incorporating tightened competition rules.<sup>liii</sup>

Better financing to help media start-ups, and increased funding for public broadcasters may also be needed — including funding for stories or platforms that boost voices of those most impacted by climate change, and those with expert training in climate change reporting. Funding for specialised climate editors and reporters could make a tangible difference: research<sup>liv</sup> shows that news outlets without such dedicated climate journalists on staff “made the connection between heat extremes and climate change less often than those that employ specialised climate journalists”.<sup>lv</sup>

Media regulation against fake news, misinformation and disinformation, as well as tighter social media regulation, could play a crucial role in the fight for trustworthy media coverage of climate change. A draft bill targeting fake news was introduced by the federal government in mid-October. However, its future remains uncertain: some critics say it doesn't go far enough,<sup>lvi</sup> while others point out elements of the new laws will be difficult to enforce.<sup>lvii</sup>

Australia also needs a better way to enforce and audit newsroom charters around independence, accuracy and integrity in order to hold media outlets to account.

Other ways forward include improved training for journalists and journalism students, as well as an increased focus on solutions journalism.

### Boost training for journalists

Journalists and journalism students still commonly misunderstand basic facts about climate change. Their understanding of climate change is too often essentially reduced to global warming, extreme weather events, or political battles about renewable energy.

On-the-job learning can also be difficult for reporters to access, especially because there remains a lack of specialist climate reporting rounds and a scarcity of professional development training with a climate focus.

Going forward, journalism degrees will need to “build out climate literacy education within core reporting and editing coursework,” as journalism researcher and lecturer Jill Hopke adroitly suggests.<sup>lviii</sup> Journalism courses will need to routinely foster an understanding of some basic science: A degree in environmental science isn’t necessary to become an excellent climate reporter, but the ability to read Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports probably is.

Journalism degrees must also teach students to link everyday stories about readers’ lives to the real-life impacts of climate change. To maximise their impact, as the journalism collective Covering Climate Now points out, stories about climate change should be localised – and humanised.<sup>lix</sup> An article about the future of work could (and, in fact, should) examine how rising temperatures will make some jobs unviable. A story on new desalination plants could explain these plants’ role in providing potable water as droughts worsen. A feature piece on tourism could address the impact of marine heatwaves on coral reefs. And an analysis article on the US election is an opportunity to highlight the importance of climate policy.

Essentially, journalists must learn to connect the dots between the everyday issues impacting their audiences and the many realities of climate change. It is time to do away with the old misconception that stories about climate change are boring (or even that they have to be overtly positioned as “climate stories”). As UNESCO explains in a media handbook, journalists “don’t really need to put ‘climate’ in their headlines to tell good climate change stories”.<sup>lx</sup>

Journalists must also learn, and be encouraged, to work across beats. As the defining story of our time, climate change affects everything and, in turn, is affected by everything from corporate decisions to government elections, as *Covering Climate Now* points out: “No matter what your specialty is — politics, business, health, housing, education, food, national security, entertainment, sports, you name it — there are strong climate connections to highlight.”<sup>lxi</sup>

There are some signs that, in some contexts at least, journalism education is moving in the right direction. Increasingly, Australian universities are incorporating climate change and environmental reporting into their curricula, especially those with strong environmental studies or journalism programs. Professional development opportunities and mid-career climate reporting courses were almost unheard of two decades ago. Today, in Australia, the Walkley Foundation just this month held a free webinar to train journalists on best-practice climate coverage.<sup>lxii</sup> And in 2023, UNESCO ran a “Climate Change in News Media” training programme, in which 14 selected media organisations from across South-East Asia were trained on how to improve their climate and environment reporting.<sup>lxiii</sup>

### Focus on solutions, not only “doomism”

Steering clear of solely covering the doom-and-gloom angles of climate change is another tactic Australian media outlets could leverage to increase impact and boost readership.

Research has repeatedly shown that audiences switch off the news when they perceive it as “too negative”; as behavioural scientist Caroline Orr Bueno has warned, scaring readers “makes them

reject the message.”<sup>lxiv</sup> What’s more, repeatedly exposing a reader to a similar story over time particular a similar negative story they very quickly come to view that story with anger, boredom and hostility.<sup>lxv</sup>

If audiences are instead presented with attainable solutions, they may become motivated to tackle the issue. Such is the basis of “solutions journalism,” which is gaining traction as a way to lead conversations about how to solve climate change.

In combination with telling stories that elicit an emotional response – stories that thread the needle between an audience member’s everyday life and climate change, or humanise the impacts of climate change — this approach can help Australian media banish the long-held belief that audiences don’t care about climate change.

Innovative use of new storytelling platforms, from podcasts to “scrollytelling” formats or data visualisations or photo essays, can further engage young audiences, or digital audiences with limited attention spans.

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Despite climate change being one of the most pressing challenges of contemporary society, Australian media is not fulfilling its roles and responsibilities in reporting the issue – or its real-life impacts.

The reasons for this are myriad. They range from a lack of training among journalism students and reporters; funding models that disincentivise in-depth coverage of the issue; an erroneous belief among editorial directors that audiences just don’t care about environmental issues; widespread job cuts across the industry, leading to a scarcity of dedicated climate reporters; and commercial interests influencing some media outlets’ editorial agendas, combined with a lack of sufficiently diversified media ownership. Until very recently, journalists, on the whole, have not begun having conversations – across beats nor across newsrooms — about our roles and responsibilities in reporting on and responding to the real-life impacts of climate change.

But hope is on the horizon. More of us are turning our minds to how to do better.

Take me, for example. I'm no longer working at the clickbait-driven newsroom you found me in at the beginning of this essay, drinking my way through a mountain of disposable coffee cups and cluelessly remarking on how weirdly rainy this summer is predicted to be.

I have a long way to go, but I've begun to connect the dots. I recently attended a professional development lecture on climate reporting, and this week I interviewed two climate experts. I've begun working with others in the disability community to highlight the ways global warming will impact Australia's more vulnerable minority groups. I've asked the managing editor at the publication I now work for if I can present some of these learnings to the other journalists.

I hope that, by revisiting our basic roles and responsibilities as journalists, the Australian media can do better. We were all drawn to journalism with noble aims. Now's the time to do what we'd first intended: hold the powerful to account, share important truths, and drive positive change.

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