Professor Alison Anderson—written evidence (FOJ0074)

Submission to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's inquiry into 'The future of journalism'

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Summary

- This submission addresses the future of journalism by focusing on climate change and the question of how public policy could better support the training of journalists, particularly at the local level.

- Local media have a vital role to play in engaging people with the local impacts of climate change.

- However, shifts in the media landscape have led local news outlets to be in a very precarious position which threatens public interest journalism and the quality of reporting on climate issues.

- While there is a significant appetite for news on climate change, the public have little trust in journalists as compared to other actors such as scientists.

- Successful training initiatives have been developed in the US and Australia which train local news reporters to work in innovative ways with meteorologists and improve levels of trust and engagement.

- Greater resources need to be made available to reporters covering climate science at the local level, including more training initiatives and increasing the presence of trusted voices.

Climate change communication and journalism

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges that we face in the 21st century and the news media play a central part in communicating the science. Journalists play a key role in framing the climate change issue (Anderson, 2014). Environmental stories often get more coverage in local compared to national media (Anderson, 2014; PIEC, 2014; Howarth & Anderson, 2019). Local media constitute an important source of knowledge for environmental issues, particularly among older age groups - with TV news being the most accessed offline source of news and one of the most trusted media sources (European Broadcasting Union, 2018; Newman et al., 2017; Reuters Digital News Report 2019; Shuckburgh et al. 2012). The journalists we interviewed in a recent study on local media reporting on climate change thought that regional outlets play an important watchdog role but that media are faced with issues around what one reporter described as a: "disintegrating industry, collapse in advertising revenues, changes caused by digital publishing revolution, fewer journalists with less time, less pay, easily bored editors" (Howarth and Anderson, 2019).

Research suggests that Information on the local impacts of climate change is more effective at engaging audiences than national or global information (Holmes & Hall, 2019; Moser, 2018). Indeed, a survey into people's attitudes to climate change following the 2013 UK floods found those affected were significantly more likely to be concerned about climate change than those that were not directly impacted (Capstick et al., 2015). When it comes to reporting on climate change, the provision of localised and up-to-date advice is crucial and helps communities to make effective decisions (Holmes and Hall, 2019).

A recent piece of research in the US tested different TV media reports on climate change and found that short localised reports on the issue enabled viewers to gain a better understanding of the local and personal relevance of climate change to them (Feygina et al., 2020).

Challenges and the threats to public interest journalism

The number of journalists on local news outlets has shrunk and reporters are often not based in the geographical community they are covering (Reuters Digital News Report, 2019). This has led to a significant decline in public interest reporting. Recent years have also seen the increasing emergence of 'hyperlocal' journalism– online ventures often run by citizen journalists that are geographically based and community oriented and tend to focus on neighbourhood issues such as the protection of a local green space (Williams et al., 2015).

However, such ventures are highly precarious.

The quality of reporting has suffered as it is increasingly spread across several different regions (Ramsay & Moore, 2016). There has been a significant decline in the numbers of people in the UK reading a local/regional printed newspaper each week (Reuters Digital News Report, 2019).

Appetite for news on climate change

Evidence suggests that there is considerable interest in climate change among the UK public. A recent YouGov poll commissioned in 2020 found that 40% of the public think that the media do not give enough space to climate change (Corner, 2020). Most of those between the ages of 18-24 (60%) believe that it does not gain sufficient attention. However, there is a widespread lack of trust in reporters who are much less trusted than scientists, television newsreaders and government agencies (Steentjes et al. (2020).

Recognising this issue, a number of initiatives across the globe have sought to build closer relationships between scientists and local media. The starting point is the recognition that local meteorologists are extremely well-placed in communicating climate science and information can be tailored in authoritative and visually appealing ways to particular regional segments of the audience.

Training initiatives

News stories that emphasize solutions increase engagement with the issues. In the USA the Climate Matters imitative (led by Edward Maibach at George Mason University) trains weathercasters and local reporters to cover climate impacts in "ways that are local, immediate and personal – grounded in the latest science". This https://medialibrary.climatecentral.org/about-us/ has led to significantly improved reporting. . By 2016 over three hundred weathercasters at 202 TV stations across the US were taking part in the Climate Matters initiative.

Another very successful program is run by the Monash Climate Communication Research Hub at Monash University and also works with weathercasters to insert trusted and personally engaging information in local media outlets: https://medialibrary.climatecentral.org/about-us

However, a survey of members of the Society of Environmental Journalists undertaken in Spring 2018 in the US found that despite the interest in professional development activities related to climate change reporting (e.g. learning about climate solutions and impacts, how to access credible sources of climate stories, and how to craft local climate stories), considerable barriers were impeding them from covering local climate change stories, including staffing cutbacks (Maibach, 2018; Maibach et al., 2018).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Engaging in processes of constructive dialogue between scientists and local media would lead to a number of benefit including better incorporation of the local context in science, greater understanding of how scientists and media work, better communication skills and trusted relationships between scientists, the media and public (Howarth and Black, 2015). However, greater resources need to be deployed to support the future of environmental journalism, which has particularly suffered at the local level. This could be through exploring charitable status options or tax relief for local news outlets. Some small-scale efforts have been made to improve training but much more remains to be done to support vital community models of news-gathering.

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