

“Boring but Important”: How climate journalism is caught between commercial and normative news media logic

News media play a critical role in informing citizens about climate change across the world (Newman et al., 2020). However, professional norms and standards of news journalism, also called news media logic (Asp, 2014), challenge climate coverage and affect the outcome of coverage (Engesser, 2017). This study investigates how conflicting journalistic norms related to commercial news logic, with the objective to boost news circulation, and normative logic, with the objective to empower the public to participate in democracy (Karidi, 2018; Landerer, 2013), challenge climate change reporting. This is done through interviews with 12 Danish climate journalists representing the main providers of climate news in Denmark.

Findings show that climate journalists in particular experience challenges related to commercial media logic in terms of the issue’s lack of newsworthiness as well as its complexity. Indeed, even though the interviews in this study are conducted after the severe drought in 2022, climate change is still perceived as ‘boring’ in many newsrooms due to the lack of commercial news values. These challenges collide with notions related to normative logic of not ensuring the density and quality of this ever-relevant issue. The findings thus highlight inherent paradoxes in climate journalism. However, there appears to be a growing consensus on its relevance for the public and, consequently, the need to cover it. This suggests that climate journalism is moving in a more normative direction, where public opinion formation precedes commercial considerations.

The study indicates a need for a structural evolution in journalism regarding education and practice. As climate change encompasses various scientific fields and societal aspects, journalists require a broader knowledge base which calls for journalism education to integrate more scientific understanding, enabling future journalists to handle complex topics like climate change. Moreover, the findings suggest a need for an ongoing dialogue within the journalism community about reinterpreting journalistic norms, such as timeliness and personalisation, in the context of climate reporting in order to pave the way for a climate journalism that aligns with both commercial viability and normative imperatives.

References

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