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6 Journalism as an Advocate for Social Change and Public Engagement

Reporting Environmental Crisis in the Digital Era

Susan Forde

This chapter considers the impact of ongoing changes in the news media landscape on the ability of media to adequately report complex issues – the “big issues” of our time. Specifically, it considers both the limitations and new opportunities that the digitisation of news content presents for the quality coverage of complex social and political issues, such as environmental crises. The chapter questions what conditions now exist in the media system for environmental issues and specifically climate justice to be presented accurately to the public, and with purpose. This discussion is informed by a focused case study on the journalistic performance of an independent online media outlet, The Guardian Australia. The Guardian’s “Keep it in the Ground” climate change campaign epitomises advocacy forms of journalism that are motivated by and designed to deliver social change.

Introduction

Communications stalwart James Carey delivered a useful assessment of the “communication revolution” in 1969, which at that time was comprised of the development of the telegraph and the growth of mass media. These highways of information, he said, had “cut across structural divisions in society ... Modern communications media allowed individuals to be linked, for the first time, directly to a national community without the mediating influence of regional and other local affiliations” (Carey 1969 [1979]: 129). Importantly, the communication revolution as he saw it had facilitated the development of specialised media located in ethnic, occupational, class, regional, religious and other “special interest” sections of society. Carey finds that some minority media were “in many ways more crucial forms of communication because they are building blocks upon which the social structure is built up and they serve as intermediate mechanisms linking local and partial milieus to the wider community” (p. 130). These media represent a “centrifugal force

in social organization” by, among other things, “transforming groups into audiences” (p. 131). Foxwell-Norton’s work resonates (2015), identifying that the greatest opportunity for sound coverage of environmental issues rests with community and alternative media forms – indeed, the proximity of community media producers to their local communities ensures a safer pair of hands, so to speak, than that offered by often-distant and preoccupied dominant media.

Carey is important here because he demonstrates that the *new* communication revolution – the digital media revolution – has been experienced before, albeit in a different guise and with different media, and has impacted on societies, politics, and culture. Carey’s talk about the potential for the “communication revolution” to “cut across structural divisions in society” is reminiscent of more recent enthusiasm about the democratising potential of alternative and community media forms (outlined well in Bennett 2003; Lister et al. 2009). Lister et al. confirm that “speculation, prediction, theorization and argument about the nature and potential of these new media began to proceed at a bewildering and breathless pace”, with past and present research challenging existing assumptions about media, culture, technology, and nature (2009: 2). The emergence of new media in the mid-1980s was greeted with hype, as is the case with every new technological development (see also Flew 2008); but the field is now in a position to apply some “hard-headed reflection born of experience and [with] enough time to recover some critical poise” (Lister et al. 2009: 2). The broader question is whether – as many argue – the *current* communication revolution is indeed transformative, and will change the way people live and act *as democratic citizens*. A second question is whether the digital revolution will also change the way the polity responds to new forms of active citizenship – will this (really) facilitate a new era of people power, fuelled by mass demonstrations emanating from social media posts, email newsletter campaigns and crowdfunding?

I will present here an overview of the impact of digital and social media on journalism and social movements and focus the discussion on environmental crisis and climate change. I will consider in-depth a particular journalistic model – demonstrated in *The Guardian’s* “Keep It in the Ground” anti-fossil fuels campaign – to evaluate the motivations and editorial processes which contributed to this particular journalistic experiment in environmental reporting. Hackett, Forde, Gunster, and Foxwell (2017) argued that “[t]he inadequacy of conventional news media’s climate journalism is evidence of their ‘market failure’”. Supporters of more effective and empowering climate communication have potential common cause with emergent movements for democratic media reform. *The Guardian’s* work is considered with this in mind. First, though, I will provide some background to both alternative and mainstream journalism’s interactions with digital and social media.

Journalism, Digital, and Social Media

A glance at any contemporary media and communications conference programmes, or indeed at the list of journals publishing the work of scholars in media fields is a good indicator of the key preoccupations of the field at any point in time. Clearly, the rise of digital and social media – and their impacts on traditional media, forms of journalism, and public-to-polity interactions – are the focus of much current scholarship. Some of that work is highlighted later in this chapter. Interestingly, the research evidence about the impact of digital and social media on journalism swings widely between a fairly common view that new media have revolutionized communication, and cautious assessments that see new media as simply a new tool for journalists, editors, activists and broader social movements to use to best effect. Juris argues that independent media activists “have made particularly effective use of new technologies through alternative and tactical forms of digital media production” (2005: 200). He finds that digital technologies have allowed anti-globalization activists to sidestep the mass media to circulate messages:

while in the past activists had to rely on experts and the mass media to circulate their messages, largely due to high transaction costs and time constraints, they can now use new digital technologies to take on much of this work themselves, assuming greater control over the media production process, while enhancing the speed of information flow.

(2005: 201)

The use of YouTube by environmental activists forms the basis of discussion from leading Australian environmental communication researchers, Brett Hutchins and Libby Lester (2015). Their consideration of environmental protest and associated media coverage in the southwest of Tasmania describes the effective combination of on-site protest with the online distribution of video footage through YouTube (2015). Dramatic footage – of two protesters chained inside a wrecked car body that is then attacked by loggers – received widespread coverage from major media. Hutchins and Lester (2015) particularly refer to the “switching point” in this mediatized environmental conflict, the moment when the protest group – Still Wild, Still Threatened – uploaded the footage to both MySpace and YouTube and

shifted the dominant public account of the incident in the favor of activists, transforming the episode from an “isolated incident” in a remote forest into a “savage attack” on peaceful protestors... The shocking nature of the footage and viral distribution of the video

obligated both government and industry representatives to answer difficult questions posed in the news media.

(p. 346)

Bruns draws connections between the development of the practices of citizen journalism and the technological frameworks of the Web 2.0 publishing technologies of news blogs, open-source Internet publishing, and social media, all of which are underpinned by online platforms. He is cautious, however, that drawing this connection “is by no means to fall into the trap of technological determinism: in a variety of forms, and without using the term itself, citizen journalism has been practiced ... for decades, even centuries” (2015: 379).

Studies of alternative and community media have become a growing sub-set of media studies scholarship (see particularly Couldry and Curran’s excellent, early recognition of this in their 2003 edited collection). Subsequent work, such as that delivered by Poell and Borra (2012), brings the traditional connection between social movements and media to the digital environment. They examine the controversial G20 Toronto protests in 2009 to understand the role of digital and social media in modern activist campaigns. With a focus on Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube, their analysis of the social media content of alternative media during the G20 protests in 2009 indicated that alternative media, when using such social media platforms, often delivered similar content to the mainstream media. Essentially, social media forms forced alternative media practitioners to deliver event-driven content that focused on police conflict, rather than a more considered treatment of the issues that usually characterized alternative media coverage (2012: 705). Similarly, Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Scheafer, in examining the Arab Spring coverage through social media – and assessing the impact of social media on activism and political effectiveness – found “a consistently negative correlation between the extent of social media penetration and the amount of protests” (2013: 132). Their overall findings were that much research seems to “overemphasize the centrality of social media in protest. As always the ‘real’ question is not whether this or that type of media plays a major role but how that role varies over time and circumstance” (*ibid.*).

Lance Bennett reminds us that it is the context of the technology, and not the technology itself, that should be considered if we are to assess the empowerment potential of the Internet and, by extension, of digital and social media (2003: 19). He warns that the rise in global activism which is often presented as a result of the capabilities of new technologies and portals cannot be wholly attributed to the reduced costs of the Internet and its potential to coordinate activism and collective protest. Rather, it is the “social and political dynamics of protest” that have changed “due to the ways in which economic globalization has refigured politics, social institutions, and identity formation within societies” (p. 25). Gerbaudo

suggests that “social media can be seen as the contemporary equivalent of what the newspaper, the poster, the leaflet or direct mail were for the labour movement” (2012: 4). They are now primarily a way to notify activists of events and to encourage their involvement. There is little doubt that the potential networking and campaign opportunities that social media provide form part of the work – perhaps a core part of the work – of alternative and community media journalists and producers. However, the evidence suggests that while social media’s positive impact on protest action is intuitive due to their broad reach and efficiency, the evidence is mixed about the real “democratising” potential of digital and social media forms.

Method: A Case Study of Environmental Coverage

This case study focuses on the Australian edition of *The Guardian*, while recognising that the broad Keep It in the Ground campaign emanated from the newspaper’s London headquarters. I note for readers, though, that my data rely on content published in the Australian edition. *The Guardian* was chosen primarily because it appears to be driven by a few converging and complementary factors: it is seeking to distinguish itself from other daily media in Australia by presenting a progressive view of current issues; it is identifying the weaknesses in current mainstream media coverage and practices and trying to show “a new way” for journalism; and its ownership structure is a trust which regularly reaffirms its commitment to producing a strong journalistic product, rather than maximizing profit and readership. Importantly for this particular chapter, *The Guardian* (Australia) is an entirely online newspaper, and there is little doubt that in the pre-digital era, *The Guardian* (Australia) would not have been publishing a daily news product. It is the efficiencies of the Internet – both in publishing content, and disseminating it to a wide audience – that have facilitated the growth of a range of online alternative and independent news sites, and *The Guardian* is a key example.

My analysis of *The Guardian* represents a case study approach as a way to examine and understand contemporary environmental reporting. This approach enables the research to focus on specific practices, and follow them through their processes to their outputs in detail. It is not overview research, but “detailed examination of a single example” (Flyvberg 2004: 420). This research interrogates the editorial and journalistic tone and practice of *The Guardian*’s “Keep It in the Ground” (KIITG) campaign in considered detail. It is important in case study research to ensure the data gathering goes beyond “a method of producing anecdotes” and arrives at considered conclusions based on in-depth examples (Flyvberg 2004: 422). The data drawn from *The Guardian* for this chapter are indeed an “information-oriented selection” (p. 426), designed to illustrate some of the key themes discussed

in this book. Specifically, I have examined the initial articles from both *The Guardian*'s editor, Alan Rusbridger, and *The Guardian* journalists at the launch of the campaign to understand the rationale behind it, and to establish the publication's motivations and objectives. I have also examined a selection of copy during the campaign which overtly speaks of the journalism undertaken, and to reinforce this further have analysed the 12 podcast episodes of the KIITG campaign which features the "behind-the-scenes" activity of journalists and editors in delivering this "new way" of reporting climate change.

"Keep It in the Ground": *The Guardian*

Climate change is the biggest story journalism has never successfully told. *The Guardian*'s editor-in-chief, Alan Rusbridger, has decided to change that. This podcast series follows Rusbridger and his team as they set out to find a new narrative on the greatest threat to humanity.

These are the establishing phrases for the KIITG campaign, launched in March 2015 by *The Guardian*. The story, headlined "Find a new way to tell the story", introduces readers to the newspaper's campaign, which is, essentially, attempting to expose the enormity of the climate crisis, and to propose that in order to solve this impending crisis the corporate world should begin to divest its interests in the fossil fuels industry. A crucial starting point for the journalism which forms the KIITG campaign is to accept the climate science – in doing so, *The Guardian* refuses to continually rehearse debates about climate change, global warming, and environmental crisis. *The Guardian* editors and journalists accept that climate change is real and a threat to humanity – and all of its journalism starts from that point. This is a deliberate and necessary stand to take for then-editor Alan Rusbridger. The main focus of this first piece is to enable readers to take the journey with reporters from *The Guardian* to find a new way to tell the climate change story – to listen to podcasts from the newsroom, to see how journalists manage the process, the mistakes they make, the successes they have (Krotoski 2015). KIITG is an international news-media-driven initiative. The idea to "keep it in the ground" comes from environmentalist Bill McKibben, founder of the 350.org social movement and leading international environmentalist, journalist, and author of 25 books including *The End of Nature* (1989), the work that flagged global warming and the necessary changes to human behaviour in order to salvage a sustainable future.

The campaign focuses on divestment, and began with a plea to major investment trusts The Gates Foundation and the Wellcome Trust to divest their investments in the top 200 companies involved in the fossil fuels industry. *The Guardian*'s focus is squarely on the role journalism

can and should play in not just creating awareness and providing information, but in animating the public to take action. This content provides a model for an alternative form of journalism that, in the face of major crises, jumps off the fence and takes responsibility for playing a key public role in facilitating debate and encouraging and enabling citizen action. The KIITG campaign was the culmination of professional discussions among the Board, editorial chiefs, and journalistic staff of *The Guardian*. These conversations identify that previous climate change coverage has left audiences “feeling disheartened and disengaged” (15 March 2015) and that the KIITG campaign is a real opportunity to engage, feel empowered, and to act by supporting the divestment aims and goals of the campaign. Audiences can, for example, donate to the campaign; contribute to letter-writing campaigns to the Wellcome Trust and the Gates Foundation to encourage them to divest of all fossil fuel investments; and to take this technique to other major financial institutions, trusts, superannuation funds, etc. *The Guardian* attempts to place its KIITG campaign in a continuum of moral and ethical fights against recognized “wrongs” in the world. Rusbridger explains (March 2015):

the moral crusaders – among them Archbishop Desmond Tutu – see divestment from fossil fuels in much the same light as earlier campaigners saw the push to pull money out of tobacco, arms, apartheid South Africa – or even slavery.

The Guardian's commitment is backed by its own board's decision in April 2015 to divest more than €800 million from coal, oil, and gas interests, with Chairman of *The Guardian*'s board Neil Berkett declaring that the Guardian Media Group (GMG) became the largest fund yet to pull out of coal, gas, and oil company investment in a decision that Berkett called a “hard-nosed business decision” justified on ethical and financial grounds (Carrington, *The Guardian*, 2 April 2015). The opportunities for readers to participate in the KIITG campaign, and to take action and affect change, are consistently reinforced by columnists, journalists, and editors alike in the KIITG pages, finally urging “The time is now. Join us.”

The Guardian presents, as part of its campaign, a series of 12 podcasts, recorded over the first five months of the campaign, which follow journalists on their journey to “find a new way of telling the story” as directed by editor Rusbridger. Audio from these podcasts records the conversations journalists have to find ways of reporting in a manner that will overcome the struggle that journalism has had for 20 years to report these issues in a manner that will empower, rather than disengage, its audience. Outgoing Editor Alan Rusbridger, who saw KIITG as his final campaign, says in Episode 1 of the podcast series that climate change

is “clearly the most important story that we could be thinking about and yet you scan the daily newspapers and it’s almost absent”. KIITG is underpinned by Rusbridger’s belief that journalism – a profession that has served him for his entire career – has failed on the issue of climate change. Over a five-month period, Rusbridger, his senior editors, and journalists look for new angles on the climate change story which are designed to engage the public more with the issue, and the podcasts record their deliberations. One of the key ideas they develop is to orbit their reporting around the central idea of divestment. The narrator to the podcast series, journalist Aleks Krotoski, tells the audience in Episode 4:

The Guardian wanted to focus [its campaign on divestment]. It picked two targets to ask to divest – not the worst kids on the block, nice liberal ones, a little like *The Guardian* – who are doing good stuff but shouldn’t be in the messy world of oil, gas and coal.

In this, *The Guardian* staff are identifying the publication as a left-ish, progressive publication that is not radical but which, on this issue at least, is trying for social change. The conversations between journalists and senior editors evident throughout the podcasts suggest they are led by Rusbridger to develop an advocacy form of journalism that is campaigning for a particular outcome – for major financial institutions to divest themselves of fossil fuel investments. This campaign sits uncomfortably with some of the staff. Rusbridger says while news media sometimes take an advocacy stance on some issues – such as female genital mutilation – they often do so knowing that there is little argument to be had *against* their stance. Climate change is different:

climate change for whatever reason is seen as a controversial subject and so therefore some people see that it’s the duty of media to be objective and impartial and not take a side and I think it has surprised some people that the newspaper has taken a side, and said ‘we believe in the science’.

(Rusbridger in *The Guardian* podcast series, Episode 12)

This leads to broader questions about the place of advocacy journalism in both the modern and historical news landscape – for while “the press” advocating on particular issues is generally frowned upon, there is clear evidence that news media sometimes undertake this form of journalism in the pursuit of a higher cause. They take an advocacy approach on issues such as politicians’ salaries and benefits; the importance of economic growth; and have also often supported particular election outcomes (News Corp’s long record on this is notable – see McKnight (2012) for a particularly compelling and evidence-based account). Further, McKnight’s account describes an organisation which has overtly

presented centre-right politics to a large readership – in some capital cities in Australia, this readership has no other daily news options – and in this has clearly carried out advocacy journalism on key political issues. Murdoch’s record on covering climate change in Australia, for example, and in prioritising the views of climate change denialists over others, is a strong example of the mainstream mastheads “taking a stand” on particular issues and abandoning notions of objective journalism. This is not necessarily problematic, as long as the audience is clear that this is where the news media outlet is coming from. And in this, *The Guardian* is providing a leading example of transparency in their journalism – the words from Rusbridger and his journalists are very clear in framing what *The Guardian* believes, what it accepts as truth, and what motivations will drive their journalism.

This type of approach leads *The Guardian* to develop a series of investigative stories around the major fossil fuel companies; to have their senior financial editor “do the maths” to determine exactly what the cost of leaving fossil fuels in the ground would be; to canvas the range of views that different world religions have on climate change; and to run an interview with Shell CEO Ben Van Beurden, who agreed to speak to *The Guardian*. Through the podcasts, we hear *The Guardian*’s economics Larry Elliot discuss the content of the article with Rusbridger and his fellow journalists, and to walk through the various scenarios that we might expect to play out in the case of fossil fuels staying in the ground. The point of the discussions – and of the eventual article – is not to suggest that KIITG is an impossible campaign, but rather to understand the complexity of the issue and to expect that the changes being called for will occur over a period of time. It is also designed to show that *The Guardian* is not ignoring counter-arguments – such as the economic impact of the loss of the fossil fuels industry – but is instead engaging with these issues and endeavouring to find solutions.

Overall, *The Guardian* produced 200 stories about climate change during the first five months of the KIITG campaign, and those 200 stories attracted six million page views. They also had just over 200,000 people sign their petition to ask the Wellcome Trust and The Gates Foundation to divest of their fossil fuel interests; and 125,000 of those petitioners asked to be kept updated about the progress of the campaign. Both the Wellcome Trust and The Gates Foundation did not divest their fossil fuel interests – and gave various reasons for doing so, with the Wellcome Trust primarily arguing they had decided to stay “in the tent” (so to speak) rather than to get out of the game altogether and divest. It is clear from the podcasts that Rusbridger, his senior editors, and the journalists are disappointed that they did not gain traction with the two main targets of the divestment campaign, although they do feel that they have had a strong impact on public debate around the divestment of fossil fuel interests. Major international newspapers such as *The Financial Times*

ran stories about divestment in which they interviewed major companies about their views on the issue. The campaign had also gained Rusbridger an audience with major financial institutions, politicians, and international campaign organizations who had heard about the campaign.

The Guardian journalists observe that a major achievement of the campaign to date was to give readers a sense of agency. More radically, *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot said the newspaper would go after the fossil fuel industry through this campaign more than it had ever done before (Episode 2):

oil firms have to be made the pariahs of the world. They have to be stigmatized, they have to be reduced in their stature... If we want to change the world ... then we've got to actually deploy the measures that are going to change the world. And that's only going to happen through acting at the political level to lay down regulations which say, 'those fossil fuels are going to stay in the ground'. Everything else is prodding around on the edges of the problem, and not actually grasping that problem.

Conclusion

The 2015 KIITG campaign sought to find a new way to tell the climate change story, and considerable effort was invested by *The Guardian's* Board, editors, and journalists to achieve this. The series of 12 podcasts reveals a staff committed to the central role of their media organisation in not only informing, but also empowering their public. The editorial conversations revealed in the podcasts also bring a level of transparency and openness to the journalistic process – this must be considered a positive and necessary move in an era in which the terms “fake news” and “media elites” are employed by powerful political figures (US President Donald Trump's Twitter feed provides much evidence of this; Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has also employed these terms – see Hunter 2016). Similarly, news organisations such as *ProPublica*, and to some extent *The Washington Post* (particularly, David Farenthold's Pulitzer Prize-winning work), are also identifying the importance of transparency in their journalistic routines, and are revealing their news-gathering processes to readers (see, for example, Umansky in *ProPublica*, 2017; and Farenthold in *TWP*, 2016).

This case study suggests that *The Guardian* continues to practice advocacy journalism on the notion of climate change. *The Guardian* (Australia) employed a similar advocacy stance in the “same sex marriage” postal survey in Australia. In the case examined here – climate change – *The Guardian's* advocacy was designed to directly encourage civic engagement and action by involving its audiences in the campaign

for the divestment of fossil fuel interests. There is no suggestion either in the content, or in the bulk of the journalists' deliberations, that the newspaper is advocating radical change to society, although it is calling for radical decisions from major financial institutions to remove one of their most profitable stocks – fossil fuels. The podcasts show that the editorial conversations that occurred among the journalists were cooperative, even though there was diversity within the editorial team about the journalistic route to take.

In *The Guardian's* KIITG campaign, we see strong evidence for the *facilitative* role of journalism, specifically a conscious mission to improve the quality of public life and to promote active citizenship (Christians et al. 2009: 126). Civic democracy is the key concern of the facilitative role, which sees the public as key *actors* in public life, who can support solutions and resolve public problems. The facilitative role is something of a reformist, rather than revolutionary, approach for the media outlet, and this fits squarely with *The Guardian's* outward persona. Let us consider the radical role for a moment, though. Radical journalism aims to eliminate the concentration of social power to achieve true equity and participation in decisions affecting society (Christians et al. 2009; Downing, 2001). It has sympathy with social movements representing marginalized or disenfranchised groups, and takes the public engagement and activation that characterizes the facilitative role to a new level – it encourages changes “in the core of existing social institutions” and supports change in the systems of communication (Christians et al. 2009: 179). Based on the case study, there is evidence that *The Guardian's* KIITG fulfilled a facilitative role far more comfortably than a radical role, even though it relied on information from social movements such as *350.org* and *carbontracker.org* that *do* appear to be fulfilling a more radical role. *The Guardian's* campaign, then, was informed by more radical solutions but continued to operate within a reformist framework – looking for ways to improve the current condition rather than to fundamentally change it. These “facilitative” and “radical” roles stand in contrast to the other media roles that Christians et al. noted in 2009 (and see Hackett et al. 2017, for a closer examination of these different media roles in relation to environmental coverage).

The key indicators of advocacy journalism – and indeed, in the recognised traits of many alternative news media outlets (Atton & Hamilton 2008; Forde 2011) – are evident in *The Guardian's* work on climate change. Most importantly, the news campaign examined here is not endeavouring to simply “present” climate change to readers, but rather to “address” climate change. This position can be taken *because* the starting point for the journalism is to recognise that climate change is real, and that something can be done about it. The newsgathering then sets about undertaking tasks, and finding stories, that are geared towards actions rather than simply providing information. *The Guardian*

provides tools for action, and overtly tells its readers that it is delivering a message of hope for the public, rather than disempowerment. In this case study, *The Guardian* has communicated climate change in a way that focuses on social change, and the news-reading public's potential role to *participate* in social change.

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