

Editorial

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Introduction

This issue reflects upon key concerns and challenges for media and communications at a time of planetary crisis. Maitreyee Mishra's contribution foregrounds the need to democratise climate change knowledge. She specifically considers the role and strengths of traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous ecological knowledge for communities in India, while noting the communicational challenges involved. Carlotta Verita and Hendrik Theine's work highlights the intersections between climate change and economic inequality in the US. Trish Morgan's article presents a select analysis of *The Climate Book* as a focusing device for the political economy of communication. It acknowledges the materiality of media and communications, degrowth and the so-called "waste economy" and argues that *The Climate Book* is significant for researching these themes. Benedetta Brevini's concluding article critically analyses artificial intelligence in the context of deepening environmental crisis. It builds on findings from *The Climate Book* and calls for scholars of political economy to reflect on the need for an eco-political economy of AI. This approach would need to consider the infrastructural, ownership and environmental dimensions of related technologies, including energy and water usage, along with the vast production chains involved in the creation of AI materialities. Finally, Jorge Valdovinos reviews *Media: A Transdisciplinary Enquiry*, which advances a wide-ranging and transdisciplinary approach to the study of media and communication.

Why *The Climate Book?* Greta Thunberg and media influence

Greta Thunberg is a key figure in the contemporary environmental movement, particularly in relation to climate change. A mere 20 years on the planet, she has become a globally recognisable activist, known for her forthright, uncompromising rhetoric, direct challenges against climate delay and inaction, and for her wry humour (such as when she turns the words of distasteful figures such as Donald Trump and Andrew Tate back on themselves). Furthermore, starting at age 15 with her School Strike for Climate (*Skolstrejk för klimatet*) outside the Swedish parliament, she has motivated a generation of youth activists through the Fridays for Future movement.

Media and communications have been seminal to Thunberg's rise to global popularity. The combination of her child-like appearance with her hard-hitting and passionate pleas for action, high-profile arrests for activism, and dogged demands to "unite behind the science" have made for a

unique media-friendly package. With extensive and snowballing coverage, she has utilized online social media platforms such as Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) to deliver and amplify her message, especially to younger people.

In 2018 Thunberg gained worldwide media attention when scolding the UN at COP24 for only being concerned with “green economic growth” for fear of “seeming unpopular” Rather than relentlessly pushing for more growth, she called for an “emergency brake” and criticised members for not being “mature enough to tell it like it is.” She then remarked that “Even that burden you leave to children” (Democracy Now!, 2018). Her uncompromising rhetoric was in evidence throughout the 2018 speech, particularly in the following pronouncement:

Our civilization is being sacrificed for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue making enormous amounts of money Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few. (Democracy Now!, 2018)

Her 2019 address, again to the UN (she sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to attend), also received wide media attention for a relentless, passionate critique of the status quo. Thunberg argued that,

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! (NPR, 2019)

This 2019 speech was widely covered in traditional and online media, but perhaps what also amplified this was Donald Trump. He attended for 10 minutes and tweeted the video of her remarks with the sarcastic comment “She seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!” (Trump, 2019). Rather than fire back at Trump, she initially changed her Twitter bio to read that she was “A very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future.” However, she bided her time until Trump’s departure from the White House in January 2021. Then she tweeted a photo of Trump, captioning it “He seems like a very happy old man looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!” (Thunberg, 2021). She also recycled a nasty Trump comment in 2019 about her “anger” problem, which was provoked by her being *Time* magazine’s person of the year. In this instance, during his “stop the count” campaign when he lost the election, she tweeted, echoing his words “So ridiculous. Donald must work on his Anger Management problem, then go to a good old-fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Donald, Chill!” (Thunberg, 2020).

Thunberg’s unique personality has undoubtedly influenced the field of media and communications. This journal issue proposes that increased attention to her Fridays for Future movement, the impish way she deploys humour, along with her searing critique of the status quo, has increased research interest in climate activism, climate inaction and climate justice, as other youth leaders from around the world have gathered for their own protests. Her passionate, simple rhetoric about uniting behind the science combines with the “acting as if” pushback against those in power who say they are acting on climate change. Prominent media personalities with popular credibility, such as David Attenborough, met with Thunberg and advocated for more urgent climate action. Intergenerational-focused movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Scientists Rebellion

also generated momentum. Their use of carnival and spectacle has undoubtedly contributed to media coverage, discussion and debate on the urgency of climate and environmental issues.

Thunberg, media and *The Climate Book*

As a contribution to the field of communication, particularly the political economy of communication in relation to the environmental crisis, this issue looks beyond the spectacle, the increased recognition and prominence of climate and environmental issues and debates about framing and breadth of coverage, to acknowledge a maturation in Thunberg's approach. To date, this has not been the subject of much discussion in our field.

On 27 October 2022, *The Climate Book* created by Thunberg and containing works from around 100 key authors was published (UK edition). This is not just a book edited by a very prominent contemporary climate activist. It is a substantive work bringing together the insights of leading figures across multiple disciplines. Thus, the book is a landmark reference and education point, given Thunberg's role in mobilising a global youth movement for climate and environmental action and justice.

The Climate Book is designed as a layperson's reference with pithy state-of-the-art analyses and insights on issues of climate and environmental science, the uneven geographical impacts of environmental crisis, potential pathways for action on environmental crisis as well as critiques of inaction. Key contributors to this multidisciplinary work include Michael Oppenheimer, Johan Rockström, Katharine Hayhoe, Tamsin Edwards, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Kevin Anderson, Alice Larkin, Nicholas Stern, Jason Hickel, Amitav Ghosh, Kate Raworth, Margaret Atwood and Naomi Klein. These are but a small sample of the scientists, social scientists, economists, policymakers, journalists, media producers and activists who made contributions.

The Climate Book's contribution to the field

This issue contends that it is important for the book to serve as a discussion point for media and communications scholarship. It is inherently multidisciplinary, drawing together a wide range of perspectives from climatology, oceanography, earth system sciences, along with history, sociology, media, culture, policy, and activism. The book is laid out in five large sections, with easy to understand, layperson-level short essays throughout. The first "How Climate Works" draws on histories of CO₂, the evolutionary impact of humans, extinction, how climate change was discovered, the lack of action and theories of tipping points. These expert essays are punctuated by three short reflections by Thunberg herself. They are titled "To solve this problem, we need to understand it", "The science is as solid as it gets" and "This is the biggest story in the world". The next four sections all proceed similarly, with section titles such as "How our Planet is Changing", "How it Affects Us", "What We've Done About It" and "What We Must Do Now" (Thunberg, 2022).

This issue contends that the book itself calls into question the very notions of disciplinary silos and the academic division of labour, given the deepening environmental crisis. We acknowledge that no single discipline can provide all answers to the multiple aspects of this crisis. While the search for such knowledge might be difficult and off-putting, we suggest that Thunberg's book is an exemplar of multidisciplinarity that non-specialists can easily engage with. Therefore, the contribution of Thunberg's book to the field of communication is threefold. First, it points readers to the wealth and variety of scientific, social-scientific, policy, media, cultural and activist

perspectives. It shows how these perspectives can be disseminated in formats such as popular science books, climate fiction and documentary, policy documents, digital media content and activist resources. Thus, a volume of accessible knowledge on environmental crisis is available to scholars, without them having to change disciplines or having to engage directly with academic-level scientific literature.

Second, by engaging with such knowledge, repackaged in this book to be both scientifically robust and reader-friendly, the political economy of communication can strengthen its gravitas and contribution to meaningful engagement and action. Thus, in engaging with accessible scientific knowledge, the field can better position itself as key to the collaboration between different fields, policymakers, publics and activists. This approach acknowledges the importance of both scientific expertise and the insights and perspectives from the humanities and social sciences.

Third, the political economy approach is in a key position to foster and encourage best practice around environmental communication. Here, in the face of environmental crisis, we must challenge the prevailing notion that scientific knowledge is inaccessible or irrelevant to non-specialists. The sub-fields of science and environmental communication have a track record in providing key insights. This, coupled with the availability of layperson-friendly scientific literature, offers us an opportunity to expand our remit. We must bear in mind of course the lessons from C.P. Snow's "Two Cultures" and continue to work on bridging the gap between science and humanities. More than ever, making an effort to bridge that gap is an imperative for anyone working in the area of environmental crisis. Not engaging with the science in this way is a missed opportunity to strengthen the political economy approach to environmental communication.

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