



# NEGOTIATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRISIS

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# 25. Telling the ‘Truth’: Communication of the Climate Protest Agenda in the UK Legacy Media

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This essay draws on the results of a thematic discourse analysis of UK media coverage of climate strike actions that took place in 2019, and reflects on the importance of the framing of protester claims-making and identity for wider adoption of climate protest messages. It revisits a key question for the organisers of such protests regarding how they can overcome the potential conflict between ensuring their actions pass the test of newsworthiness required to ensure media attention, without failing the tests of claims-making legitimisation necessary for an issue to become accepted as a societal problem that requires urgent resolution.

## Introduction

The momentum of climate protests grew exponentially throughout 2018 and 2019, culminating in two key climate protest actions in the autumn of 2019: the Fridays for Future (FFF) Climate Strike, which was the biggest climate strike ever held (Laville and Watts 2019); and the Extinction Rebellion (XR) International Rebellion, which saw acts of civil disobedience take place in cities around the world over a two-week period.

Despite the size and scale of these protests, in the UK at least, issues surrounding the environment failed to make any obvious political headway at the extraordinary general election held in December of that year. Instead, the Conservative Party enjoyed a landslide victory, despite the relatively scant coverage of environmental issues in their campaigning or manifesto (Richards 2019). This situation was reflected in the media, whose coverage in the run up to the election was dominated by Brexit and leadership personalities, with the environment way down the list of news priorities (Loughborough University 2019).

This gap in reporting raises the question of where and how the protest momentum stalled, and what role the press has in setting the environmental agenda for their readership.

For the protest organisations involved, this issue begs the question of how they can strike a balance between creating an “image event” (Cox and Schwarze 2015: 76) sufficient to ensure it earns media coverage, whilst gaining enough claims-making legitimisation to promote environmental issues to recognised social problems (Hansen 2015). How can protesters “command attention, gain legitimacy and invoke action” (Hansen 2015: 30) against the backdrop of a media who “more often than not, prefer to maintain and reproduce the dominant mainstream frames and cultural codes” (Hannigan 2014: 137), and who are naturally wedded to the reporting of newsworthy content in rapid news cycles, which the relatively slow-moving issue of environmental degradation does not seem to support (Carvalho 2010)?

This chapter presents the key findings of a thematic discourse analysis carried out on UK newspaper reporting of the two climate protest actions mentioned above that took place in the autumn of 2019. More than 4000 excerpts were coded using a six-stage method (after Braun and Clarke 2006), examining the balance of event reporting in comparison to underlying communication of protester claims-making, the presentation of protester motivation and identity and the potential politicisation of protest news reporting.

Analysis was carried out on legacy media<sup>1</sup> publications from across the political spectrum in the UK (*The Guardian*, *BBC Online*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*), and on protester organisation press

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1 I.e. traditional print or television media news organisations that predate online formats.

releases, covering four events: FFF's Climate Strike, XR's International Rebellion opening actions, XR's Tube action and the outcome of XR's legal challenge to the Metropolitan Police on their London-wide ban on protesters meeting in groups.

## Key Findings

The analysis showed that media coverage of the events was highly politicised, demonstrated by the proportion of coverage given to voices in support of, or opposition to, protest, which was directly relatable to the political bias of the various publications. For example, for one coded item 'Protest or protester opposition directly quoted', 77% of excerpts came from the right-leaning publications studied (*The Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*). This propensity towards confirmation bias was evident across publications and across events, with various methods employed to promote established positions, and reinforce the views and expectations of the paper's readership.

In fact, all publications appeared to stay firmly within a preferred narrative, whether they were reporting on FFF or XR actions. For example, *The Guardian* stuck to its depiction of protests as peaceable and non-violent, even when violence broke out during the XR Tube action (detailed below), instead focusing the majority of its coverage on the peaceable actions that took place as opposed to the assault perpetuated on protesters by members of the travelling public (Gayle 2019). *The Daily Telegraph*, on the other hand, focused its coverage of protests on issues relating to law and order, with even legal protest actions being likened to criminality via comments that protests were taking police away from dealing with 'serious crime' (Sawer and Roberts 2019). Whilst a focus on matters of law and order may be understandable when reporting on XR actions for which disruption and arrest are deliberate tactics (Taylor 2020), it is perhaps more telling of a commitment to a preferred narrative when it is used to report on the FFF action. This action saw very few arrests, with a Metropolitan Police commander quoted as saying that "overall the day ran smoothly" and any real disruption was attributable to a "tiny minority" of protesters (*BBC Online* 2019). A focus on law-and-order issues at this protest would therefore seem incongruous, unless it is deployed in order to support a predefined position.

The protest organisations themselves were no less inclined to stick to the script when it came to their own publications. FFF displayed a strong bias towards an environmental injustice narrative, enough so to frighten *The Daily Telegraph* into branding their claims as “anti-science” and “hugely dangerous” (Sawer and Roberts 2019). XR on the other hand avoided any direct challenge to the status quo (at least in the texts I studied), relying instead on what Hannigan (2014) terms the Arcadian narrative, rallying supporters around a sense of history and a love of land, as well as self-sacrifice for the greater good (Extinction Rebellion 2019).

These favoured narratives fail to make much impression on news reporting, however, instead becoming either lost in translation or else eclipsed by protest event-driven news coverage. Aside from *The Daily Telegraph*'s slightly alarmist reporting on the demands of the UK Student Climate Network, communication of underlying protester claims-making was far less evident than reporting on other so-called newsworthy items. In fact, if we exclude the protester press releases, just 3% of the analysed excerpts related to the communication of underlying protest messages. Given that media framing is so important to the recognition of an issue, particularly where there is little perceived direct experience of it (Happer and Philo 2013; Hansen 2015; Whitmarsh 2015), this gap should be considered a problem for these organisations.

On this note, analysis of mention of the specifics of environmental problems showed that scientific explanation or legitimisation of environmental issues accounted for fewer than 1% of all excerpts, including the statements of the protester organisations. General comments about the issues were more prevalent, but specifics were thin on the ground. The reasons for this absence are not clear: perhaps the British public are already considered familiar enough with the specifics of the issues so as not to need further explanation, as Juknevičienė et al.'s (2011) comparative study of the Swedish and Lithuanian media suggests, or perhaps the science narrative is not favoured due to a perceived mistrust of science, even though ‘empirically [...] blanket mistrust of scientists is rare in most countries’ (Fairbrother 2017: 3).

In terms of who or what was responsible for either the cause or resolution of environmental issues, the government were most commonly blamed, with the economy and personal responsibility

coming a distant second and third. Very occasional mention was made of corporate responsibility. Considering that corporations are in fact responsible for so much environmental damage (Riley 2017), and that they wield considerably more power in some cases than nation states (Rodionova 2016), this is both surprising and worrying.

Stahel (2016) suggests that whilst state responsibility is key to environmental agreements being made, the state-centred approach to change is less relevant in today's global markets (as also alluded to in Bracking's chapter, this volume). If FFF's environmental injustice narrative is to be credible, however, surely corporate responsibility should feature more prominently?

There were also distinct differences in the amount of coverage given over to questions of responsibility in the different sections of the press, with *The Guardian* and *BBC Online* together accounting for 42% of excerpts on this issue, compared to 7% for *The Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*.

Another consideration is the propensity towards a binary journalism; a presentation of us and them where journalist and reader combine in juxtaposition to an enemy other, with one single view claimed as the only worldview; a style of journalism which, according to Sonwalker (2005: 262) "came out of the closet after 9/11" and which is evident today, not only in the media, but in popular politics, not least during the 2020 US presidential election. The identification of protesters as other was strongly evident, particularly in the right-leaning press. Various tactics were used to perpetuate this view, with FFF protesters largely othered on the grounds that they were naïve truants out for an educational day trip, despite the fact that the September FFF Climate Strike was an inter-generational effort. This fact is in line with the depiction of FFF protesters found in the media of both Germany (Bergmann and Ossewaarde 2019) and Sweden (Jacobssen 2019).

XR protesters are similarly othered in some publications, on occasion via direct name calling. The *Daily Mail*, for example, described XR protesters as an "eco-mob" of "nose-ringed crusties" (Sinmaz et al. 2019). *The Daily Telegraph* described XR protesters as engaged in various activities (e.g. yoga, drumming and chanting, lighting incense (Dixon and Lyons 2019)) that might be juxtaposed against the hard-working parents, commuters, hospital patients and gig-economy workers

presented at odds with the protesters: the “people like us” whose lives and livelihoods are disrupted by the actions of protesters. Alternatively, protesters of all types are at times depicted as deviant or criminal. In fact, reporting of protesters as either naïve children or figures of fun often sits alongside depictions of protesters as being complicit in violence or being likened to criminality without the slightest irony or sense of contradiction.

Even when protesters were the victims of criminal acts there was little sympathy expressed for them either on a personal level, or in terms of their cause. The XR Tube action on 17 October 2019 saw protesters dragged from the roof of a train at Canning Town and beaten and kicked on the platform (Gardner 2019). Despite this reality, all publications mentioned the arrest of protesters rather than their assailants. The messages of protest were all but drowned out, with communication of underlying claims-making at this event barely registering.

Similarly, the successful XR legal challenge did not garner much sympathy for protesters from some corners of the press, who, despite their recent vociferous defence of democracy when threatened by direct XR action in the autumn of 2020 (*The Daily Telegraph* 2020), failed to defend the democratic right of peaceable protest. It instead quoted Scotland Yard as saying that it required “new powers to help it shut down future green protests”, making much of the fact that protesters who were wrongly arrested could now sue the Metropolitan Police, thereby placing additional burdens on taxpayers who “already face a bill of at least £24 million” as a result of the International Rebellion (Ledwith 2019: online). That the overreach of police powers might, in itself, pose a threat to democratic rights was only mentioned in *The Guardian*.

Whilst the right-leaning press seem to resort to scare-tactics or othering of protesters in some cases in order to disguise or delegitimize protester claims-making, more sympathetic treatment was evident in the left-leaning publication. *The Guardian's* coverage of the FFF march was both enthusiastic and extensive and whilst their reporting on XR's actions was less so, it was certainly more measured in tone than reporting found elsewhere. *BBC Online* coverage, however, was very event-driven. Whilst extensive, it appeared to be the most neutral, perhaps reflecting its wish to avoid accusations of bias to which, as a public broadcaster,

it is particularly sensitive, so much so that its new Director General has introduced new stringent rules on impartiality amongst staff, that even extend to their personal lives (Waterson 2020).

Given that the right-leaning publications with their potentially greater readership reach are more vociferous in opposition to protest than other media outlets,<sup>2</sup> the implications are that the clearest statement to the largest audience is one of protester message de-legitimation and incitement of opposition to protest, drowning out the less strident voices of support. *BBC Online's* greater reach<sup>3</sup> is negated by its focus on neutrality. Whether the recent XR blockade of Murdoch-owned publications, with its subsequent chorus of approbation, was the right way to redress this balance is debatable, however, since it allowed the right-leaning press the chance to play the victim and, perhaps justifiably, accuse the protesters of being actively anti-democratic.

## Conclusion

There will always be competing items clamouring for media coverage, with the next big story always just around the corner. After five years of Brexit dominating the UK news and political debate, we might have longed for an alternative story. That it comes along in the shape of a deadly, life-limiting global pandemic is something that few would have anticipated and that even fewer would have desired. Against this fierce competition for column inches, the environment often does not just play second fiddle, but instead barely makes the line-up at all.

The efforts of FFF and XR to redress this balance, to give voice to the often voiceless other-than-human world, should therefore be admired (see also North and Paterson, this volume). As this research demonstrates however, it is debatable how much this voice is heard amongst the noise of other aspects of protests—those “image events” (Cox and Schwarze 2015) that may capture headlines, but do not necessarily win the hearts and minds of the public, or at least not enough to represent an electoral threat to government.

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2 *The Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* had a 1.6 million circulation between them during 2019, compared to *The Guardian's* 141,000 (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2020).

3 In 2015 its news app was used by 51% of UK smartphone users (National Union of Journalists 2015).

In addition, whilst the deployment of ever more disruptive and spectacular tactics may gain column inches, the greater shock value may mean that the fewer of those inches are dedicated to communicating a sympathetic message of protester claims, even when protesters have been attacked or legally wronged. These events may instead distract from the underlying message, meaning that even the determined reader might struggle to discover any real details of the issues, let alone suggestions for their resolution. Reporting in effect becomes less focused on messages that may aid the legitimization of protester claims-making, and more on the reporting of the sensational aspects of those events, or else on direct denigration of protesters and their messages in support of the status quo. This observation, however, is not intended to detract from the equally important experiential and community-making dimensions of participation in protest events, which are critical elements of building 'social movement potency' regarding environmental justice concerns (cf. Salter and Sullivan 2008; Mueller and Sullivan 2015).

XR and FFF both request that a citizens' assembly is formed with a focus on the environment, showing their recognition that protest can only be a short-term strategy in striving for urgent and meaningful change. That we have been discussing climate change for more than thirty years, that the main NGOs have already traversed the path from protest to a seat at the table, and that despite all this we have moved during that time from anticipated problems with climate change to a real and present climate crisis, should be a warning to those who see the chance for direct political participation as an outcome in itself.

In majoritarian democracies such as the UK, political change can be brought about by the perception of an electoral threat (Vliengenthart et al. 2016). Winning sufficient public support from all sections of society is necessary if we are to signal this electoral threat to whichever incumbent government is in power, such that they do indeed make decisions on behalf of the environment that override purely economic considerations. For corporations that continue to perpetuate environmental degradation and social injustice, consumer and shareholder pressure, combined with widespread public support for globally-agreed governmental controls and legislation, are necessary to bring about a change in attitude and strategy.

The fact that transnational corporations control such a high proportion of the media (Stahel 2016), the media's propensity to remain within hegemonic norms (Sonwalker 2005) and readers' preference for affirmation of their pre-established views rather than seeking a challenge to them (Happer and Philo 2013), all suggest that garnering media coverage is currently of limited use in the urgent fight to reverse our increasingly disastrous environmental trajectory. Media from across the political spectrum will deliver the news that it thinks reflects the priorities and views of its readership and its corporate owners. Circumvention of the legacy media via a restoration of faith in the democratising influence of the Internet and the citizen journalist may provide one way forward. Following this logic, if the environment can be made to be a priority for readers, voters and consumers, then the news, corporate behaviour and the political will to make fundamental changes should follow.

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