

Writing for Change: Can storytelling save the planet?

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For the first time in years, discussions about climate change dominate the headlines in German media more than issues of migration. Every Friday, thousands of school kids on strike point to important questions that had been silenced for too long. No matter how long their protests will last, these children have facilitated a revival of environmental journalism. The international conference thus opened a space for a deeper understanding of a topic that is likely to dominate the forthcoming years.

Junior and senior scholars from Europe and the Americas followed the invitation by the research group Hazardous Travels at the Rachel Carson Center to discuss questions concerning society and environment: Can journalism change the way we look at the environment? Should journalism inform or educate the general public and become a constructive change maker in society? What role have journalists played in the adoption of environmental policies like the Basel convention on toxic waste? How can environmental historians, media scholars and journalists enrich each others' perspectives?¹ The workshop was accompanied by live tweets, with a hashtag inspired by Rachel Carson: *#writingforchange*. Her work² on the adverse effects of pesticide use not only promotes important changes in environmental awareness on an individual and institutional level, but also inspires movements and writers around the world.

In his keynote speech, professor and journalist TORSTEN SCHÄFER (Darmstadt) shed light on climate-journalism. Reporting on the issue, he argued, bears several challenges: Climate change is neither sexy nor easy to understand; it often lacks news values like timeliness or urgency³, specific places (when droughts affect whole regions, for example), or stars – Greta Thunberg being a recent exception. Journalists apparently have to find

a new approach that goes beyond the dominant framework of technology and economy. An important tool for writing about climate catastrophes, too Schäfer explained, is storytelling – since “facts convince the mind but not the heart” – within frames such as society, arts, culture, health and daily life. In other words: Within frames that matter to people. Later in the conference, one such approach was presented: US-American meteorologists who got organized under the slogan *#MetsUnite* to inform their audiences not only about the weather-forecast, but also about climate change. One key problem in environmental journalism, Schäfer furtherly argued, is the lack of resources: Money, people, and, especially, time. Improving research conditions would therefore mean creating more funds, working in teams, building stronger networks between journalists and scientists. To put climate stories to the forefront, so Schäfer concluded, structures generally need to change: „We need to offer more advanced training courses, create study programs for environmental journalism and deepen knowledge about sources.” That way, he said, we will also take the role of science in shaping society more seriously – a process already initiated by the alliances between the school children of *#FridaysForFuture* and the *Scientists for Future*.

What's the weather like? Have you heard of the earthquake? Stories of nature and the environment have always fascinated humankind. In the opening talk, MARK NEUZIL (St. Thomas) traced back the history of environmental journalism all the way to the Bible, where in the book Isaiah, the first environmental degradation was attributed to human pollution. At the same time, so Neuzil pointed out, we read: „The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.” (Isaiah 50:4) Starting from there, Neuzil took the audience on a

¹ Simone Müller, Das Umdenken herbeischreiben?, https://www.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/news/2019/mueller_umweltjournalismus.html (01.05.2019).

² Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Boston 1962.

³ See, for instance, the concept of „slow violence“, coined by Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge MA 2011.

time travel to show that successful writing always follows archetypal stories. His advice: Use storytelling techniques to make climate change tangible. Think about old myths like the great flood, think global stories locally, find a hero to accompany on his quest: „Write lovingly about earthworms!”

For a proof that experimental writing can be fruitful in talking about complex issues, the Argentinian case is worth analyzing. Here, poets have initiated the development of an environmental movement since the 1960s. AYELEN DICHDJÍ (Quilmes) spoke about the “counter-culture” created by journals like *Eco contemporáneo* or *Mutantia* that evolved in reaction to a mainstream media not taking up environmental issues at the time. Rachel Carson’s writing, so Dichtdji pointed out, has been a source of inspiration for the editors, just as it has been for people in Europe.

DAVID LARSSON HEIDENBLAD (Lund) and DOUBRAVKA OLŠÁKOVÁ (Prague) talked about how environmental movements started growing in Europe. As an intricate example, Heidenblad focused on Barbro Soller, the first Swedish journalist employed full-time for environmental topics already in the 1960s when widespread belief in the „technology fix” was still ubiquitous – large parts of the environmental movement being pro-nuclear power before Soller’s writings. Her goal was to translate scientific findings and warnings into an everyday language. Insofar, Heidenblad remarked, Soller’s endeavour was similar to that of the Swedish girl on strike Greta Thunberg today, who also reminds journalists to break down complex realities into narratives that any reader, even kids, can understand. Olšáková discovered similarities to the Czech author Josef Velek, who was neither satisfied with merely reporting news, but incited his readers to take action by co-founding the biggest Czech youth movement *Brontosaurus* in 1974.

NATAŠA SIMEUNOVIĆ BAJIĆ’s presentation on unreliable sources and Fake News in Serbia in Panel 2 led to a discussion about the role of journalism: Can a society only become environmentally conscious through journalistic reporting? What responsibility do politics have to inform society about environmental hazards?

ANNA MAZANIK (Budapest) gave insights into the Soviet press and environmental awareness under Socialism. In times of a repressive regime, she argued, Soviet environmentalism was described as a „little corner of freedom”. In the 1950s and 1960s, investigative reports were commissioned by national newspapers and journals, for example on the issue of the Baikal-lake, which led to a successful campaign to stop construction work in the sensitive ecosystem.

Not only writers, but also photographers have played a crucial role in the development of environmental movements around the world. Greenpeace is the most radical example of environmental activism and images working hand in hand: Their media strategy has enabled an initial group of hippies to become the most visible environmental organization in the world today. In her presentation, ANNA KATHARINA WOEBSE (Gießen) presented the works of influential photographers such as Sebastião Salgado and others.

Renowned *Nature*-journalist ALISON C. ABBOT (Munich) joined for a vivid conversation about challenges and prospects of the sector. She has been travelling to interview ecologists in Ethiopia or olive farmers in Southern Italy for years on, always interested in changing environments, but not in „being the change” herself.

The Tuesday panels shed light on different trends in environmental reporting and its evaluation. BEATRICE DERNBACH (Nürnberg) recommended a less personal, but more analytic approach. According to her, Journalists should not tell their readers what to think, but what to think *about*. The greatest challenge in environmental journalism today could therefore be detected in the ability to provide enough context for complex issues.

A practical approach to improve science journalism and get away from scandalisation of environmental issues was taken by WIEBKE RÖGENER (Dortmund) with her research project *Medien-Doktor*. She defined clear criteria for constructive, balanced reporting:

No Exaggerations, no understatement, evidence presented in the article, citation of experts and sources, presentation of pro and cons, complexity, news factor, outlook to-

wards possible solutions, spatial dimension, timescale, context and costs.

ROSALIND DONALD (New York) presented an interesting case study of engaged journalism in the United States on the example of TV weather presenters who work under the premise of using the sympathy of their audience and the enormous reach to talk about climate change in ways that matter to people in their homes and in their communities. When using the weather forecast as a platform to educate people about climate change, hosts are skating on thin ice in a country governed by denial and ignorance. That does not stop meteorologists like Bernadette Woods Placky, a member of #MetsUnite, to use clear and strong words to make climate change tangible for her audience: "It's a jobs story. It's an agriculture story. Connect it to the farm bill: Boom!"

"Writing for change" requires skills that have yet to be developed and might be facilitated through additional training in journalism schools. Vice versa, an academia focusing more on popular scientific publishing might provide stimulating effects. Journalist Linda Solomon Wood put it this way: „We'll need reporters who know how to file freedom of information requests, read and grasp the nuances of corporate reports, check official numbers on carbon pollution, and compare public corporate spin with shareholder reports. These climate reporters will need to read widely, keep current with science and track the politics of climate policy. Above all else, they will need to write well so that they can make complex facts accessible to a popular audience.“⁴

The two-day workshop made clear: To facilitate a broader understanding of complex issues like climate change, science and journalism will have to strengthen their bonds. This is the only way climate stories can move beyond clichés of the solitary polar bear to creative story telling formats that will make a change in society's environmental awareness.

Conference overview:

Simone M. Müller (LMU Munich) and Evi Zemanek (University of Freiburg): Introduction

Panel 1: Stories of Origin

Chair: Jonas Stuck (LMU Munich)

Mark Neuzil (University of St. Thomas): Environmental Journalism and Its History

Ayelen Dichdji (National University of Quilmes): Journalism, Environmental History and Discourse. Review about the Beginning of Environmentalism in Argentinian Counter-Culture Press between 1960 and 1980

David Larrson Heidenblad (Lund University): Barbro Soller and the Environmental Moment in Sweden, 1967–1969

Doubravka Olšáková (Academy of Science of the Czech Republic Prague): The Silent Spring, Radio Free Europe, and Oil Gobblers: The Beginnings of Environmental Journalism in Czechoslovakia

Panel 2: What if Politics Won't Listen?

Chair: Maximilian Feichtner (LMU Munich)

Anna Mazanik (CEU Budapest): Soviet Press and Environmental Awareness under Socialism (1965–1985)

Nataša Simeunović Bajić (University of Nis): Producing Environmental Crisis in Serbia: Unreliable Sources, Fake News and Conspiracy Theories

Keynote

Torsten Schäfer (Hochschule Darmstadt): Climate Journalism – Ethical Dimension, Historical Context and Social Relevance of a New Key Discipline

Panel 3: Tools and Trends in Telling Green Stories

Chair: Evi Zemanek (University of Freiburg)

Wiebke Rögener (TU Dortmund) „Good Environmental Journalism“? Defining Criteria from Different Perspectives

Beatrice Dernbach (TH Nürnberg): Skandalisierung, Negativismus und konstruktiver Journalismus: Aktuelle Trends im Umweltjournalismus (Scandalisation, Negativism and Constructive Journalism. Current Trends in Environmental Journalism)

⁴Linda Solomon Woods, The Year of the Climate Reporter, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/01/the-year-of-the-climate-reporter> (01.05.2019).

Panel 4: We All Saw This One Coming
Chair: Ayushi Dhawan (LMU Munich)

Anna Katharina Wobse (University of Gießen): Picturing Complexity – Environmental Photojournalism Then and Now

Rosalind Donald (Columbia University): Which Way the Wind's Blowing: Miami's Weather Forecasters and Climate Change through Andrew, Kyo and Irma

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