Climate Training for Journalists – Positivity &Solutions?

Emeritus Prof. Pat Brereton, School of Communications DCU. 4th Nov. 12.30-1.30

Ireland's changing climate and Identity

- The power of film and media – to 'green' Irish audiences/citizens
- Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema (2005)
- Ireland and the Climate Crisis ed. Robbins et al. (2020)
- Essential Concepts of Environmental Communication: An A-Z Guide
- Environmental Ethics and Film (2016)
- Environmental Literacy and New Digital Audiences (2019)
- Focus on farming/food and representations of Landscape/tourism

Solutions Journalism and Positive Storytelling: Overview of discussion

- Examples of solutions journalism in print
- The role of other media – TV, film, documentary, Radio, Podcasts
- Definitions and origins of solutions journalism
- Case study of *Rising Tides* (RTE)
- Need for positive imaginaries and solutions to crisis across media.
- Journalist/practitioner interviews: Nessa McGann, ‘Ours to Protect’ for a Q and A Session

Polycrisis: needs a range of (print) journalism solutions

- Climate and biodiversity crisis are two sides of the same coin. The loss of biodiversity accelerates climate change and vice versa. The good news is that the solutions reinforce each other as well (Timmermans 2023).
- From a ‘wicked’ set of problems to a range of long term and sustainable solutions.
- ‘Everything is Connected’ (101 Environmentalism) - makes it hard to come up with clear journalistic copy.
- Not forgetting its ‘depressive nature’ and its ‘lack of newness’ (Climate Journalism that works, 2023).

Tackling the Challenge: Climate Reporting that Works

- We need to move from crisis coverage to solutions investigation (Lance Bennett, University of Washington)
- Focus on: what is at stake?
- Who is responsible?
- What can be done about it?
- And who is responsible for what type of action?

Max Boycoff's 5 Recommendations for News Media:

1. Seek to find common ground through **human stories** can be very effective in communicating about climate change.
2. That focus on the here and now rather than distant futures often resonate with audiences
3. That don't always focus on **doom and gloom**, but also talk about the benefits of engagement and change
4. That provide spaces where people can creatively find **empowerment**, agency, self-determination, in contrast to stories that make people feel paralysed and helpless
5. To be effective, newsrooms need to smarten up and think carefully about how to address different stakeholders, audiences, citizens.

Climate Change:
New Imaginaries needed?

Climate Journalism that ‘works’!

- Approaches people at eye level in a language that they understand rather than in a ‘know-all’ manner.
- Danger of non-stop doom and gloom – it is difficult for people not to feel hopeless as a result
- Avoiding discussing the climate crisis like a ‘dull University lecture’ (never!) - using too much jargon and complexity.
- Journalism needs to be diverse and inclusive.
- Needs to be local and community based.
- Need to have impact and needs to be collaborative.

What is needed especially in Newsrooms

- Plan for dealing with online trolling and coordinated discrediting of journalists - see the roadmap for digital security.
- A strategy around visuals used to illustrate climate change stories - a helpful resource is Climate Visuals.
- Good access to scientists and sources - see Global South Climate Database.
- Attribution science is critical but not easy - not all extreme weather events are caused by climate change. See the World Weather Attribution project.
- Sometimes climate stories are simply not given top billing because editors are afraid they do not perform well.

Managing Climate Coverage and Checking Best Strategy

- 1. Have you defined the role of your organization in the climate change challenge?
- 2. Have you defined what success should look like and how you measure it?
- 3. Have you aligned your internal structures and your talent with your goals?
- 4. Have you defined your audiences, and the do’s and dont’s of your climate journalism?
- 5. Have you defined a training concept for your newsroom and leadership?
- 6. Have you thought about potential partners, including a funding strategy?
- 7. Have you mapped out stakeholder support and identified potential roadblocks?

Solutions Journalism – some readings.

- Kathryn Thier & Tong Lin (2022) How Solutions Journalism Shapes Support for Collective Climate Change Adaptation, *Environmental Communication*, 16:8, 1027-1045,
- Reuter's Report by Venissa Gruber 'Rowing Together, for better Climate Coverage'. (2023)
- Eurovision News: Climate Journalism that Works. (2023).
- The Solutions Journalism Network https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/
- Solutions story tracker (useful for examples) https://storytracker.solutionsjournalism.org/


The Field: Nurturing v's Exploiting

Images and Perceptions of key stakeholder in Irish Environmental debate - Farmers

- From classic films like *The Field* and the power of land/ownership
- Making a fertile green field from seaweed rather than nitrogen
- Growing industrial levels of farming with dangers of disease
- Larger fields, reduced hedges and increasing number of animals
- Demonstrating on tractors and a powerful Lobby in EU
- Increasing **urban-rural divide**!
- Yet research shows that concern about climate change is just as strong in rural as in urban areas.

Farmers: Empathy and Engaging with ‘resistant’ environmental Stakeholders [Oral History Book]

- But the first and last word must always be left to farmers who have had years of experience on the ground – literally – and know more about environmental issues and climate change concerns than any environmental academic, or for that matter politicians and agricultural policy makers…. Much less any journalist!
- They actively converse on a daily basis with and through nature and landscape.
- Their words and thoughts must be carefully listened to, if we are to **co-create effective land management** and food production solutions into the future to address the biggest crisis our planet is facing.

Environmental Ethics and Film (revised edition Brereton: 2026) My opening gambit!

- Why are some people in Western society actively concerned with protecting nature and natural things, while others are not, and what motivates people in the first place to become involved in environmental protection?
- These are very complex and loaded questions that preoccupy environmental communication scholars [alongside journalists!] and remain difficult to address.
- By focusing on contemporary fictional film with their often-engaging environmental **themes and storylines**, we can at least begin to tease out some of the ethical debates embedded within demands for environmental security and protection.

Rising Tides: Ireland's future in a warming world – effective audio-visual communication

- 3-part series shown on RTE (2024) – promoting 'Environmental Literacy'
- Presented by RTE journalist Philip Boucher-Hayes
- Focus groups in TuDublin to assess its 'effectiveness'
- Climate Science Communication – gauging the audience?
- Public Service Broadcasting v's Commercial TV?
- Hitting the 'sweet spot' and why climate communication is 'losing its appeal' with broadcasters (also with many audiences)?

Rising Tides: Ireland's future in a warming world (RTE), Producer Marcus Stewart

- Focusing on both aesthetical and narrative strategies used to speak to the crisis.
- This series is designed for a 'mainstream' (RTE) audience during primetime viewing and originally broadcast over three consecutive Wednesdays, starting on 27th March 2024.
- Closure of *Eco-Eye* production company: Stewart believes it is too hard to make climate change programs as they are not 'popular' with audiences, or with RTE ….
- Is same true for all coverage of climate change? [*understanding audiences interests/pleasures?]

Focus Group – responses to Science episode *[Skip through…]

- I thought it was very informative, it showed us problems on a global scale and how it could impact Ireland. Looking at examples of other people's experiences was worrying here in Ireland, while amplifying what will happen for future generations.
- I liked the way it was so global – even though it was depressing – glad they showed us what was happening.
- Showing derelict buildings on the edge of a dried river in Malawi, with the huge bolder lifted from the mountain by extreme weather and now serving as a burial site, is beyond shocking. The mudslides gave me the 'heebe jeebies'.
- While RTE (Irish TV Broadcaster) are trusted on things, some follow-up is needed to really connect with audiences.
- This is the hardest episode to digest and more attention needs to be given to hooking audiences to watch the second and third episodes.

Episode 2 Adaptation – responses!

- It was an interesting contrast between Bangladesh and how rich and poor all worked together. Meanwhile in America and Florida, it was so individualistic and expensive to keep the show on the road. The people with houses in Florida were so complacent and arrogant.
- Migration; climate change is framed as causing the problem; as a consequence, the poor people have to move from where they originally live. Alternatively, there is a need to emphasise *we* are causing climate change [in the rich Western World]. To avoid anger, focus back down on (stereotypical) notions of victims and define refugees as simply causing the problem.
- Emotional storytelling: even with water rising five metres, you needs emotion to engage audiences, as it seems so far away, leaving no real connection to it. It is seen just as a statistic by many audiences.

Episode 3 Mitigation – Responses!

- The statistics were quite shocking in comparison to Ireland's carbon emissions unlike with Norway for example. This shows how badly Ireland needs to change.
- The ocean reef sequence was very powerful and how they compared with being back on land. It was so shocking and very engaging.
- I liked the footage from Ukraine which was heavy and hard to watch. Kids are still just playing in such a war site. A war mentality is needed to get our act together!
- America is not a good model for leadership in the climate space. The program probably should have gone to China or other places.

A successful eco-documentary, or any journalistic response to CC must deal with:

- The complexity of climate change messages,
- The geographical distribution and focus of the audience
- The variety of themes and issues encapsulated by the umbrella term of climate change
- The responsibility for climate change, from top level global organisations and governments to the ‘bottom-up’ responsibility of individuals and local communities.
- The uncertainty principle, which can lead to adopting a ‘wait and see’ approach, inferring the real urgency of the problems are not immediately apparent
- While also dealing with competing themes, recalling most especially short-term economic and other immediate concerns, and various other political issues that often take precedence over longer-term difficult or so-called wicked problems around climate change (Filho et al. 2019: 4).

Educational/Media Strategies and Solutions

- a) Inform people about specific risks that climate change may pose to their own surroundings while making a connection with this global phenomenon.
- An emphasis on doomsday messages for instance is known to be far less efficient, than the alternative presentation of positive ones.
- b) Persuade people to engage and reflect around how the policies that their countries follow may be associated with climate change and how their behaviour may influence the global climate debate and mobilise people in general to become more involved in implementing climate change mitigation measures (Filho et al. 2019: 4).

Six modes by which media affects society

- **Questioning**: e.g. revealing hidden aspects of the climate issue and helping audiences to understand how their own actions might be having an impact
- **Deliberate** campaigning to change audience behaviour in a particular way: e.g. reducing flights or meat consumption
- **Inspiring**: by showing audiences a net-zero world that they want to strive to reach
- **Silencing**: e.g. excluding climate deniers which can be dangerous
- **Amplifying** and highlighting climate related stories showing the urgency of the problem
- **Normalising** behaviour patterns and changes like repair and reuse etc.

Other Media – Communicating Climate Message!

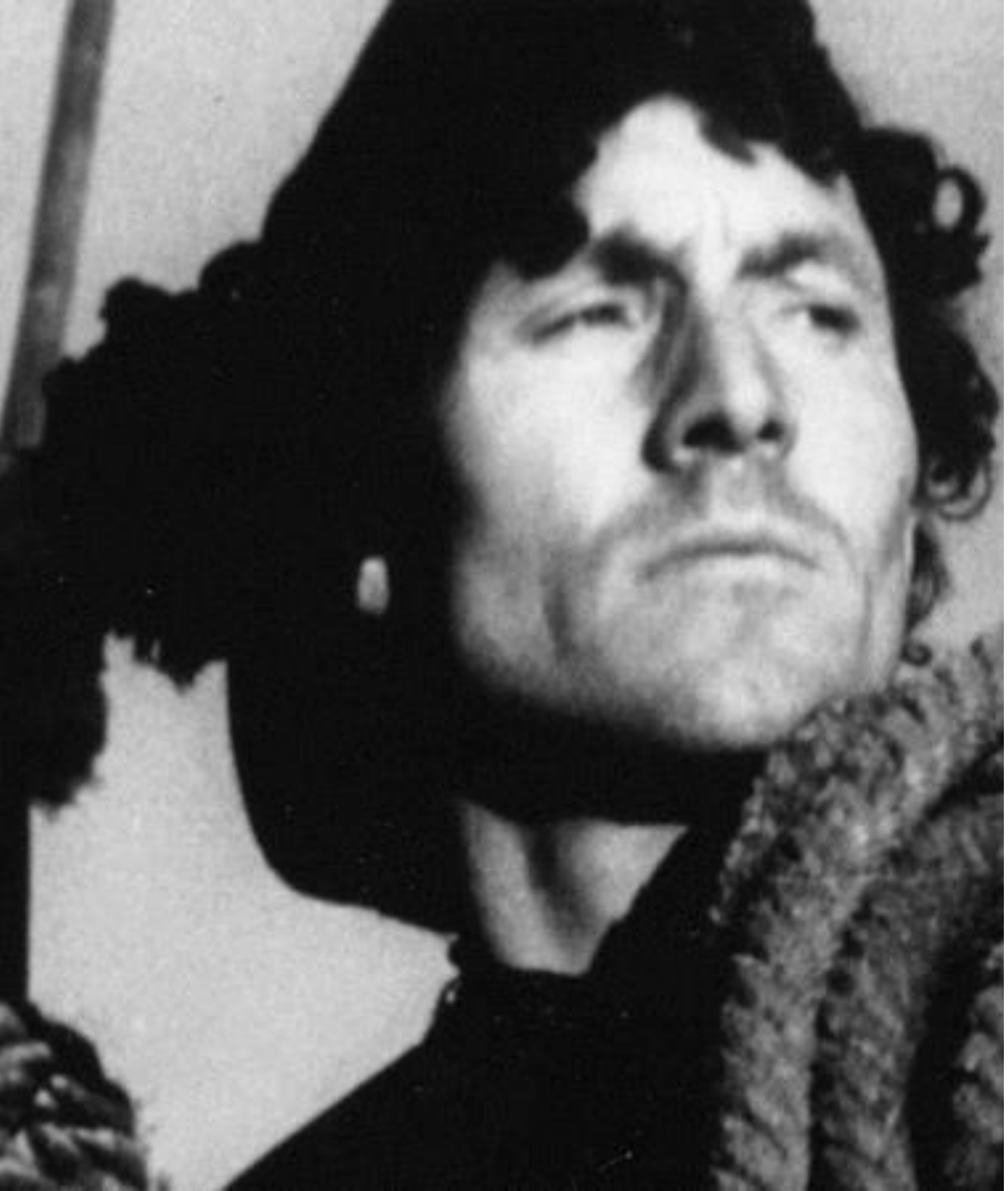
- Currently it would appear that the ‘tide is out’ regarding the climate agenda [see symposium on 10 years after Paris COP.]
- Will it take a tsunami [metaphorical or physical] to again call attention to the crisis, in light of so many global wars and other conflicts?
- Telling **effective stories** still considered the best way to get the climate crisis across
- Probably best not to ‘name it’ … as it has such difficult connotations.
- ‘Everything is Connected’ and legacy as well as online media can speak to the polycrisis…

Q and A

- *But, if time available – signal my research on Irish media and Climate Change….
- Greening Media – reducing its carbon footprint – ALBERT carbon calculator now taken over by CnaM.
- Environmental Literacy and dealing with the complexity of the issues
- From the Personal to the Public and promoting the ‘Common Good’
- From Ego to Eco…. **Climate Justice** driving radical change in eco-media coverage of climate change?
- Journalistic Agency in driving change through ‘activism’..

Irish documentary-fiction film and effective eco-storytelling.

- From *Man of Aran* to *The Field* and ‘Greening Ireland’!
- Observations from the perspective of Irish Midlands Farmers [an Oral History – coming out soon!
- Environmentalists [journalists] speaking to/with Farmers and other stakeholders.
- Dangers of journalistic preaching and polemical engagement with stakeholders.
- Case study of John Gibbons (2025) *The Lie of the Land: A Game Plan for Ireland and The Climate Crisis*.



Frugal island living – Man of Aran (1934)

- The documentarian constructed a fictional family to capture historical struggles of everyday life, which included chasing whales for their oil and other nutrients.
- All the while, the prototypical (fisherman) farmer is witnessed constantly smashing rocks to help create fertile soil and eke out a precarious living on the land.
- Recalling his later advocacy for an ‘ideal Ireland’ in a Saint Patrick’s day address in 1943, which Dev. venerated as an agrarian pastoral idyll centred on small farming households ‘satisfied with frugal comfort’
- Are we now asking citizens to ‘revert back to past levels of frugality’ if we are to address our Climate Crisis!
- Danger of MIGA (Make Ireland Great Again) effect?

Green Screens: The Power of Media to help tackle Climate Change (2022)

- Importance of media in transforming change, using its ‘brainprint’ and the large audience it reaches
- This transformation is partially driven by ‘push factors’, such as pressure from regulators, employees and stakeholders…
- Media content must use all forms of creativity to reach and promote values and behaviours that help create a more sustainable planet.
- Media companies must develop an intentional editorial strategy to achieve this, which takes account of the type of content, the expected audience and the desired impact…

The experience of building a national sustainable film making coalition

September 2021

Best practice Sustainability aims include:

- Ascertain the ‘on the ground’ buy-in for sustainable film making practices
- Levels of expertise on different approaches, across departments, which can reduce carbon emissions on set
- What areas of production need to be worked on to stimulate additional buy in from production industry in order to fully commit the sector to sustainable film making practices
- Leverage champions across industry to promote the message
- What are audiences’ expectations of the sustainable film making practices on a production they are viewing?
- Expectation of climate change adaptation or mitigation to be a feature of modern story telling?

New media regulator

- The Irish media regulator has transformed from broadcast focus of ‘Broadcast Authority of Ireland’ to ‘Coimisiún na Meán’ (The Media Commission) https://www.cnam.ie/
- It is regulating broadcast, print media, online media and SVODs
- Environmental sustainability is now a regulatory reporting mechanism
- The Commission is undertaking a review of the carbon calculation and certification in advance of new rules coming on 2024
- Ideal is for a common set of reporting standards across all screen content in Ireland

Future Regulation and Greening Media Landscape in Ireland

- Legacy media versus Online Media: Public Service Broadcasting through Commercial Media tensions – increasing tensions.
- CnaM – growing role to regulate and control as well as increase environmental mindprint (green content and storylines) and mainstreaming Carbon Calculator to reduce carbon footprint of media industry
- Animation industry to be also brought under CnaM green regulations
- Sustainability sub-committee of Animation Ireland – pushing four pillars: environmental, economic, social, human capital.

Anders Hansen and Cox's *Handbook of Environmental Communication* (see 2015 edition).

- How do human agents respond to nature/environment?
- What accounts for the development and reproduction of dominant systems of representation or discourses of the 'environment' and what communication practices contribute to the interruption, distribution or transformation of such discourses?
- What effects do different environmental sources (e.g. media), as well as specific communication practices have on audiences?
- What are the relationships between or among communications, individual's values and beliefs and their environmental behaviour?
- In what ways do different modes of dissemination and reception of scientific or technical information contribute to the understanding of, or constitute 'knowledge' of nature or various forms of environmental phenomena?
- How do humans discursively or symbolically constitute space or place?
- How do local or indigenous cultures understand 'nature' or 'environment' and how might they convey understanding of our everyday life?
- How can the broad spectrum of commercial mainstream art, promote such change?

Children's Eco-TV: Stop-Watch Productions

- Filho et al. (2019) explore how climate change communication programs, coupled with broad-based educational strategies in general seek to:
  - a) Inform (children) people about specific risks that climate change may pose to their own surroundings, while making connection with this global phenomenon. An emphasis on doomsday messages for example is known to be far less efficient, then the alternative presentation of positive ones. This is most especially true for engaging with children of this age.
  - b) Persuade (children) people to engage and reflect around how the policies that their countries follow may be associated with climate change and how their behaviour may influence the global climate debate and mobilise people in general to become more involved in implementing climate change mitigation measures (Filho et al. 2019: 4)