Teaching sustainable media: industry & academy

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Preamble

- Hello, I'm Andrew McWhirter, a senior lecturer from the Department of Media and Journalism at Glasgow Caledonian University. I've been teaching on sustainability and media, in one form or another since 2014. My contribution today mirrors some of my experiences in this area, to paraphrase Kaapa and Vaughan (2022:4) staddles both issues of representation and issues of materiality. Recently with a greater focus on the latter via an industry-standard module.
- That module is called 'Applied Skills for a Sustainable Media Industry' which is a course I helped design when we formed the BAFTA albert in Education partnership in 2017(?). Back then there were only a handful of institutions, but now this partnership is around 50 UK HEIs strong. I'm sure most of you have but if you haven't heard of albert, then in their own words they are 'the home of environmental sustainability for film and TV'.
- The LOs and assessments for the industry module are set – and operate across material and, to a lesser extent representation issues. All partners should adhere to these – even if there is some flexibility around how LOs or assessments are achieved. The way we do it at GCU is embedded and taught as part of a core Year 2 module. What this means is that often time is tight, as the content is all geared towards 4 assessments: A climate science quiz; a personal commitment; producing a production calculation; and finally pitching a climate story idea.
- I suspect part of the tensions I discuss today between industry and academia stem also from our programmes in Media and Journalism not being entirely production/material focused – as is the composition of many of the other university courses in the partnership.

Introduction

- So, I'd like to discuss teaching accredited screen industry content on climate change as it intersects with academia. Basically, tensions I have noticed between teaching industry-endorsed training on climate change and then having the freedom (or indeed time) to be able to teach students what they also really need to know about climate change and media.
- Industry-endorsed curricula often means that discussions around wider, more politically charged, issues are not always put before students.
- For instance, topics such as de-growth. Industry is unlikely to question how much production is necessary or enough (McWhirter, 2022). Arguably something which is at odds with industry ambitions, making it difficult to criticise media production in its entirety in the context of neo-liberalism. *Media content is often seen as a solution* to the climate crises in a move that echoes the idea that 'Climate change is widely represented as a techno-scientific problem requiring technical solutions' (Macgregor, 2010). Some argue we need to think of the developed world in new terms like 'over-developed' (MacGregor, 2010:226).

Tension areas

- De-growth/climate anxiety/class and socio-economic status/and mis-dis-mal information/gender and climate. So, these are some of the tension areas I have recognised. Some touched on by industry, to lesser or greater extents, and some – like de-growth or political solutions to climate change – *actively discouraged* (at least under their remit).

- You may think *class* is an odd one to choose. Yes, poverty and class are covered in the areas of climate (in)justice, but it is often framed as it relates to the global south (only recently talking about air pollution cases in impoverished areas of London). It is rarely about how working classes in the UK engage with climate change. Working classes in the norther hemisphere should also be part of 'inclusive environmentalism' (Bell and Bevan, 2021:1205).
- *Gender* is another area because it is only superficially covered in the course. When anyone says gender and climate many automatically think that we are talking about women (MacGregor, 2010) with masculinities perhaps a secondary thought.

Post-truth

- I'll focus on just one of these tension areas for my contribution today: climate information in the post-truth media environment. If we are going to teach students about the content and representation side as well as material, then this is fundamental in my view. It is especially important to remember "most individuals make sense of the world through narrative and not science" (McBeth et al., 2022). The *science deficit model* – using more facts to convince people of the importance of the problem of climate change – is not enough.
- A lot of my research (be it online criticism or influencers and creators) has looked at social media and *participation inequality*, so I am sceptical over just how much *polarisation* there is in the US and the UK between people and there is at *least* a debate to be had on that (Munroe, 2023:8). However, we are told that we are living in times of "information pollution" with types of "information disorder" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). And that we are entering or currently during a "post-truth" era.
- Of course, terms like fake news and post-truth often give us new labels for old problems. For instance, political science has known of *political homophily* – the phenomenon that suggests we tend to associate with those with *ideologically similar viewpoints* (Munroe, 2023:5) – for some time. We can point to Stephen Colbert's "truthiness" concept to know that post-truth principles have been around for a while. Naomi Klein and others have tied 'Trump's presidency to *Anthropocene catastrophism'* (cited in Rose, 2018:702). But Trump wasn't even original in pulling out of the Paris Agreement or other events because back in 2006 the Bush administration ordered NASA and other agencies not to provide the public with global warming information (Brecher, 2018:100).

Climate Bubble

- It is impossible to say what the industry position is, but tackling post-truth perspectives on climate change is not in their remit. BAFTA are strict on what is endorsed by the training. The industry position seems to be *'not giving it oxygen'*.
- I would argue that this is symptomatic of something that we might consider a 'climate bubble' borrowing from the filter bubble and echo chamber ideas. I know there are nuances and critiques of these terms, but I will *conflate them both here for simplification*. The latter concept used to explain the resistance to clear evidence found in climate change denial groups (Nguyen, 2020).
- The *climate bubble* means we – be it industry, sustainability educators, scholars, activists, or other actors – tend to think the man-made climate change debate is solved. When in reality (social) media influence is bringing up old and well-worn debates for new audiences. There is academic acknowledgment that climate change scepticism is still a valid enough idea to write and research about (Van Rensburg, 2015).

- Why this is a problem is because the *climate bubble* tends to exclude *marginalised groups* – only *one* of which I will concentrate on here: *the working class in the UK*. Some argue climate change discourse and action is *all too white and middle class*, often with activists from left of centre families with civic minded parents; and often with programmes and organisations that have failed to include or even that potentially alienate working class or other groups (Boucher, 2017; Bell and Bevan, 2021). I caveat this with a reluctance to say class is a homogenous group. For instance there are plenty of university-educated people who may belong to the traditional working class (Hak, 2021:6) and labour unions also are not against climate action as some perceive (Brecher, 2018; Rose, 2018).

(Working class) media narratives

- UK tabloids – a traditionally populist source of news and entertainment for working class audiences – as recently as 2008 were shown to be openly questioning the science on climate change and making fun of the problem (Boykoff and Mansfield, 2008) or perpetuating doom and fear (Boykoff, 2008). The same thing was shown to happen in recent years – the tabloid front page evidence here you can see is from the albert training. It shows how in 2022 the *press still makes light of the issue*. More serious broadcasters do the same. Often accurate climate information comes from broadsheet newspapers which are read more by middle class than working class audiences (Boykoff and Mansfield, 2008). But even broadcast media in the UK is prone to creating problematic discourse, such as *Sky presenter* Carole Malone calling XR a "loopy middle-class doomsday cult" (cited in Bell and Bevan, 2021:1207).

A rising challenge culture?

- In a recent survey we conducted with students who completed the albert training, we found that students across all levels of our programme thought that there had been an increase in false or inaccurate information about climate change (69.7%) with 18.2% not sure and only 12.1% convinced there had not been (Sekargati and McWhirter, 2023). I was somewhat surprised at nearly 70% across cohorts feeling this way, even if I have noticed this myself.

Teterson Creep

- In the post-truth era, I have noticed a marked difference in the attitudes of some young *male students* towards expertise and information. It seems to reinforce what I am hearing in *literature and elsewhere* around problematic masculinity. What I refer to in rather unsophisticated portmanteau here as *Teterson Creep*. Perhaps an unfair conflation of figureheads Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tait summed up rather handily by this meme.
- These often misinformed – *seemingly* diametrically opposed class examples – speak to the increasingly misogynistic voices that are mainstreaming in the 'manosphere' where once they were only found in platforms like *4Chan*. Both these examples speak to audiences who think feminism is out to destroy men and both seem to hold God-like status among young men for different reasons.
- I speak to this not just as a single example I will give here but from colleagues feeling *threatened*, from students overheard *questioning* what is being taught to them, flat earth *stickers* in the corridors, and in another project *netnography* with secondary educators, the problematic Andrew Tait-inspired behaviours of some boys.

One example

- In one example, a male student questioned some content on the albert module which said that women are disproportionately affected by climate change and account for the majority poorest people in the world. Mouthing to his classmate "that's not true". He said something to the effect of it being men and I overheard the *name Jordan*. I did not choose to challenge him and moved on – largely because he didn't speak out or directly to me.
- I was acutely aware of a viral *Jordan Peterson social media video* at the time, where he puts forward the idea that men are the most hard done by because there is *no patriarchy*. Notwithstanding the *ironically reinforcingly toxic* titles that followed the video like 'Jordan Peterson Completely Destroys This FEMINIST'.
- The way I would have talked to the student would have been to tell him about how yes, poor statistics are difficult to come by because of the *household measurements*; but that when speaking about climate we are talking about many women who *do not work* or are in more *precarious* work, and that climate does affect women more than men for *a number of reasons*: greater caring responsibilities, often less resources ,or go without food to feed their children; or how male physical and sexual violence increases with disasters, or even practicalities that women are less likely to learn how to swim! (Burrell, 2023).
- I might even *take the video itself* and challenge what Peterson calls a "tiny substrata of hyper successful men". If 85% of Fortune 500 CEOs, 78% of govt. ministers, 85% of environment ministers are a "tiny substrata of hyper successful men" then I might ask the student what a medium size substrata looks like?! *This example shows where it might be necessary to go deeper beyond the industry-endorsed materials.*
- Peterson and Tait and others like them are not showing any signs of being less popular. Peterson's YouTube channel has grown from 6.3 million in February to *over 7 million* in June 2023. In the space of a couple of weeks he gained *a few hundred thousand* followers! Peterson's videos appeal to *all types of scepticism* from denial and questioning the human impact, to denial of the reality or scientific consensus (Van Rensburg, 2015). His YouTube videos offer titles like "The World is not Ending", "Unsettled: Climate and Science" and "The Great Climate Con". Social media is picking up where more traditional working class news consumption areas have dropped off with equally problematic climate messaging seen in tabloids (Boykoff, 2008; Boykoff and Mansfield, 2008).

Solutions

- Solutions to these tensions I have considered across themes of now and in the future, or logics of in-module or external to the industry module. *Rudimentary in module*: Remove the albert branding where I take the content deeper. This is straightforward, and I tell the students that when they do not see the branding, that this is my work or that of the university. *Non-endorsement* from albert is therefore contextualised *verbally and visually*.
- Some slides build on my own research – e.g. with the Natural Environmental Research Council (NERC) and their peer support tools for climate anxiety.
- Future plans are to add further working-class contexts to the climate injustice debates; and to explore more masculinities ideas in relation to climate and gender.
- Finally, because some of these topics deserve their own space, I have designed a new Media and the Environment module. And I will seek to embed more climate content in media studies areas like analysis, audiences, and representations.

Conclusions

- Perhaps I am more acutely aware of some issues because GCU has an *above average intake* of students from traditional working-class backgrounds. And because the programmes are *majority females*, perhaps there is more of spotlight on some males. And because I am aware of the issues being faced by some secondary teachers with soon-to-be university students.
- And while it is not an absolute, there is a believe that male working classes are largely *behind the rise of right-wing populism* in Europe and Trump in the US (Hak, 2021:6). Others argue that *populist narratives* themselves attract the working class (McBeth et al., 2022:473).
- However, there are also *right and left* divisions within the working classes, so not all those contributing to right wing populism are from working class backgrounds. And not all our BAMC students are working class or display problematic masculinity.
- I would be looking for comments on this as it relates to the experiences of others; and thoughts on whether this might become a paper/others interested in collaboration!

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