

The climate emergency and future content on UK tv: carrot or stick time?

McWhirter, Andrew

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MeCCSA Paper 2023: The Climate Emergency and Future Content on UK TV: Carrot or Stick Time?

Introduction

Media and the environment has been a research interest of mine for nearly a decade. From conducting interviews on the *Star Wars* franchise, to being a founding member of the BAFTA albert in Education Partnership in 2017, to fostering international connections in this area of late.

This paper builds on my ethos of having a positive outlook towards the climate emergency and what we can do about it. What I have termed elsewhere “A scholarship of hope” (McWhirter, 2022).

Quotes

“Anthropogenic climate change is the most significant verifiable threat facing humankind in the twenty-first century”

“There is nothing inexorable about climate change just as we caused it, we also have the capacity to control it”

“Our ability to avoid the worst effects of climate change will depend on how seriously we take it”

“The issue today is no longer one of avoiding climate change, but ameliorating its worst effects”

Slide

They could all be quotes *from today*. But they were written by *media scholars* nearly *15 years ago* (Boyce and Lewis, 2009)! I use them to illustrate that, perhaps, not much has changed other than a particularly pronounced extreme in 2023 and a media discourse of late pointing to *doomerism*. Which we know is important because it has picked up an ‘ism’ now attached!

Setting the scene

The environment, media and culture has been entwined in academia for over half a century, from Raymond Williams’ 1973 *The Country and the City* and the start of *eco-criticism*, through various explorations of *news agendas* in the 1990s (Ader, 1995), to a more pronounced engagement in the 2010s with the impact of *media production* itself (McWhirter, 2022:182). A turn from representational to *material* media studies.

To what is now termed *environmental media studies* (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan, 2020). Or, as Julia Ledy (2023) ‘The concept of the Anthropocene *has taken hold* in humanities scholarship’. I prefer Jason Moore’s (2016) term *Capitalocene* as representative of the role of capitalism in world ecology.

Industry

At the same time, media industry was formulating its own varied responses. From the rise of the BAFTA chaired albert, the leading TV body on sustainability since 2011, and various BFI projects (e.g., Green Matters), or consultancies like Greenshoot; to other projects like Julie’s Bicycle in Theatre or ADGREEN for the advertising industry. In the US, the Producers Guild of America (PGA) Green Production Guide (PEACH, PEAR, PLUM) and carbon calculator. Environmental Media Association (EMA) Green Seal for Production.

Albert

Albert (small a) is the entity that I have the most involvement with, so that’s where part of my focus is. Their objectives:

1. **Inspire**; empowering the industry to create content that supports a vision for a sustainable future

2. **Restore**: enabling the industry to make positive contributions to the environment while actively eliminating waste and carbon emissions from production

Most people who know of albert would see its focus on *Point 2* – possibly due to the success of its carbon calculator – on limiting the production emissions of TV in the UK. As you can see with the *new numbering of objectives*, the focus is switching.

Power of stories

Beyond the extensive work on *environment communication* or in *news media*, there is growing work that looks at portrayals of climate change in *entertainment media* (Anthony et al., 2017; Dudo, 2017; McCormack et al., 2021; Leyda, 2023). But for too long the focus has been on high-profile films and often texts about disaster and negative effects (queue 2004s *The Day After Tomorrow*).

Most recognise the *power of narrative persuasion* in media (most of us wouldn't do this otherwise!). 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. While McCormack et al., (2021) notes that an *effective model* for visual storytelling of environmental messages has not been developed, the industry (and this research) is trying to *change that*.

Inspiration for the research & albert quote

The work has been inspired by a position taken in 2020 by a former albert member who will remain *anonymous*. They once floated the idea that climate content should be *mandatory* within any TV production genre seeking albert certification – just as it is mandatory for a consideration of the material footprint. And if not, then the production should be *decommissioned or refused commission!*

A *watered-down* notion of this now appears. Where for an albert certification, a production – more specifically a member of the *editorial team* – should consider these questions. It is largely driven by the *Climate Content Pledge* agreed at COP26 between Broadcasters to monitor Climate Content. But it is a *non-scoring question* which means it doesn't matter how they answer it.

An absence of climate content on screens

Coverage about climate in media has been steadily growing since mid-2000s (Boyce and Lewis, 2009; Boykoff and Mansfield, 2008). But big data projects such as albert's *Subtitles to Save the World* with Deloitte and others in the US demonstrate that there has been a significant lack of climate mentions on TV. Scripted entertainment generally has been shown to have *under 3% climate* content detected in nearly 40,000 analysed scripts (Giaccardi et al, 2022 – US industry).

Cli-Fi is now used to discussed environmental films and television (Leyda, 2023). I'm sure we can all point to some shows now, and 'Cli-Fi' has become a buzz word, even to its detriment. It has been applied to some shows that critics disregard such as the *NYT* assessment of Apple's *Extrapolations* as 'Climate Cringe'.

Audience appetite

Although we must take them with a *pinch of critical salt*, industry reports – or academic reports for industry –do point to audience appetite in Europe and the US for *more climate content* written into scripts (Giaccardi et al, 2022).

Why I say we must be careful is because we only need to dig a little deeper into the US example from USC, Norman Lear and Good energy to see that any participants who are categorised as ‘disengaged, doubtful, or dismissive’ (p.21) are *screened out*! So, the work is operating in a *bubble* not necessarily representative of billions of TV views.

So, a Playbook toolkit which uses a lot of this research, talks up the *alarmism* of its participants but by comparison *The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication’s Six Audiences Cross National Comparison* with nearly 200 countries (2022), headlines with the USA as ‘Less alarmed about global warming than *most other top carbon-emitting countries*’.

Introduce toolkit research

So far, research into climate storytelling content and guides and toolkits has led me to this thematic. The main toolkits for film and TV I will focus on but the others I can give some examples for. E.g., The *NYT* coverage of ‘Climate Cringe’ I noted. For Toolkits more generally, there are loads, from *The Climate Fiction Writers League to Greenstories* in the UK by Denise Baden at Southampton University to the *Media Trust* on Climate Communications. In the final category, climate and social impact scenario tools, En-Roads, websites like Hollywoodhealthandsociety.org.

Two major Ones x 2

Two major TV toolkits are those from the BAFTA-led albert organisation in the UK, via a content umbrella initiative called *Planet Placement* launched in 2019. With the various tools you can see here. Another is from Goodenergystories. What they have termed the *Playbook* launched in 2022. Even trademarking one of their tools which is interesting for a non-profit!

Early toolkit observations

- Audience: Playbook is very much for Screenwriters. Planet Placement engages more than screenwriters.
- Preparatory and pre-production ideas, over proscriptive ‘must haves’
- Some are more socio-political than others (e.g. Good Energy BIPOC inbuilt into mission. Quite apart from anything else, Black and Indigenous experiences have not been prominent in ‘Cli-Fi’ - (Leyda, 2023))
- No visible plans to go beyond ‘nudge’ behaviours. Ultimately, toothless.
- A shared focus on positive, solutions-based content (although Planet Placement is more specific about this)
- Climate content can happen in any genre at any scale (albert’s 4 Types of Climate Storytelling and Good Energy’s The Climate Lens ™)

Any scale Examples

The *Climate Storytelling* tool from albert shows that stories can be a character mentioning *something* once: “I’m feeling stressed, maybe it’s climate anxiety”; all the way up to *entire series* on the topic of climate change and everything *in between*. The Climate Lens ™ agrees that *scale* is not something we should get hung up about. So, these example demonstrate that: *I May Destroy You* showed climate news stories in the background; *Succession* Grandfather Ewan’s plot twist in leaving his money to *Greenpeace* over Cousin Greg; *Big Little Lies* explored climate anxiety in children in a humourous way in one episode. At the other end, *The Rig* (2022) disguises its climate narrative for some but for others is clearly a climate change story (al la *Don’t Look Up*). And then the most obvious, scripted entertainment that is clearly Cli-Fi, e.g., (perhaps in the *slow violence* mould?) *Extrapolations* (2023).

These toolkits aim to switch *mindsets* for content creation, akin to what Leyda (2023) conceptualises as a “climate unconscious” that the climate can be seen *anywhere*. She uses the example of *heat and sweat* on the actors in *The Walking Dead*. But as well as descriptive, it can be *proscriptive*.

Questions to Explore

So, given the *pressing issue* at hand, which is in some ways a *time-limited problem*... what does a carrot or stick approach look like? An academic toolkit could compliment these existing ones, but would it be anymore effective? Should or could policy intervene? Should the toolkits themselves no longer be about nudging behaviour and more about a Manifesto for action in the short term?

Academic Toolkit

These are some of the ideas in the *academic space* that could be useful for the creation of a toolkit.

Ofcom

These are some of the *issues and contexts* that come with considering a body like Ofcom and if they could ever encourage more climate content on TV screens.

Manifesto

This is an example manifesto. TV hasn't had anywhere near as many of them as film. So, could one work and help give *teeth to the toolkits*?

Directions of the research

To take this research into further detail, these are the methods and approaches that I am considering. *Expert interviews* with scriptwriters or related commissioners etc. Early work in anecdotal/conversational inputs have said things like “pay us and we'll write what you want”. A *thematic analysis* of the toolkits using GPT4 with its allowance for 25K word CORPUS. The Playbook alone is currently circa 30,000. Finally, enlisting the help of GPT4 via specific *Prompt Engineering* from other domains to be useful to this one *in creating toolkits and examples* e.g., exploring specific themes pertinent to all scripted content, e.g., weather.

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