

Redefinitions of objectivity in climate advocacy journalism: conceptualizations, tensions and practices

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Climate advocacy journalists have an indispensable role in the climate crisis. They can inform readers about anthropogenic climate change, address climate futures, and advocate for, or against, mitigation and adaptation solutions (Fahy, 2017; Schäfer & Painter, 2021). In this pivotal point-in-time, they can spur climate action and engagement.

Despite this societal relevance, climate advocacy journalists are virtually absent from academic research. Related studies, however, have confirmed that environmental and climate journalists hold pro-environmental beliefs and values (Giannoulis et al., 2010; Tandoc & Takahashi, 2014). This makes it interesting to consider journalistic objectivity through this lens: can one care about a topic, and still write about it objectively? The following study sets out to address this double bind.

Scholars have historically characterized objectivity through neutrality, impartiality and several other elements (e.g. McQuail, 2013), and objectivity and advocacy were seen as opposites (Fahy, 2018). Notably, recent studies find that environmental and climate journalists are challenging such notions (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2014). For example, one study shows that environmental journalists are dismissing the need for impartiality, opining that they can hold pro-environmental beliefs and still write objectively (Giannoulis et al., 2010). Another study finds that such journalists mostly agree that “interpretation borne out of journalistic experience and extensive research is an acceptable form of objectivity” (Hiles & Hinnant, 2014, p. 446).

Whilst navigating this tension between their objectivity and their human values, these journalists may be faced with additional hurdles. One example is scientific uncertainty: the scientific consensus around anthropogenic climate change has surpassed 99% (Lynas et al., 2021), but this picture is less clear around climate futures and effective solutions (Fahy, 2017). Journalists may not always have scientific backgrounds, however, given their pivotal role in communicating these topics to their readers, it is extremely relevant to understand how they are dealing with such tensions.

Therefore, this study investigates climate advocacy journalism in the Dutch setting. Through reconstructive interviews (as proposed by Reich & Barnoy, 2016, 2020), climate journalists in the Netherlands are asked about their views on the field and to which extent they experience (redefined) objectivity being at odds with advocacy when reporting about climate solutions. By reconstructing a recent climate solutions article together, the tangible practices that these journalists use to deal with such tensions are uncovered. For example, they are asked how their writing balances their own opinion and objectivity, and how they scientifically substantiate their claims. The interviews are taking place in the spring and summer of 2024, and preliminary results will be shared at the Climate Hope conference.

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