

JOURNALISM TAKING ACTION AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE

An Ethnographic Understanding of How Journalism
on Climate Change is Related to Activism

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Journalism Taking Action Against Climate Change:
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Change is Related to Activism

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The media can not tell people
what to think, but can tell
people what to think about

– Cohen 1963

ABSTRACT

Climate change is a big, complex, and obtrusive issue. Information about this issue is conveyed to citizens by journalists, some of which, after much research, are taking an activist position on the seriousness of the problem. This thesis will look at one specific way journalists cover climate change through knowledge-based journalism. The involvement with their topic brings two worlds together: activism and journalism. Three debates influence this relationship: (1) legitimization of knowledge, (2) trustworthiness, and (3) action. These points are ethnographically explored over the full length (production, dissemination, and consumption) of climate journalism within the Dutch media organization *De Correspondent*. It explores how journalism and activism are interwoven when reporting on climate change. The findings explain how personal opinions about the topic of climate change influence the tone of voice of climate journalism, and how the urgency of the topic is confusing activist motivations with a journalistic responsibility.

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HOW CLIMATE CHANGE IS PUTTING JOURNALISM ON THE SPOT



In this first chapter the research topic is introduced by discussing the urgency of climate change and the frequent media attention it receives. Citizens get informed about climate change by journalism. Since climate change is growing in its urgency, a lot of coverage on climate change news has increased the urgency in the tone of voice - sounding more and more activist. In order to prevent misrepresentation or overstated findings about climate change, research has proposed knowledge-based journalism. But also knowledge-based journalism can still sound activist.

This chapter contains three sections. Firstly, journalism on climate change will be introduced, which is the topic of this research. Three ongoing debates on climate journalism dilemma's are briefly discussed in the second section. The third section presents the methodology through which the research question is answered. It closes off with an reflection on social and personal aspects as an anthropologist that could contribute or influence the data collection of this research. The final section explains the academic and societal relevance of the research.

1.1 INTRODUCTION OF JOURNALISM ON CLIMATE CHANGE

An important environmental issue of our time is argued to be climate change (Painter, Kristiansen, and Schäfer 2018). The gradual warming of the Earth's average temperature has the potential to permanently alter life on this planet. Scientists detect rising sea levels, melting ice and permafrost, insects and birds arriving sooner in the spring, and the spread of pesticides and diseases to new areas. The future, as predicted by climate models, is not promising. According to these sciences we can expect more heat waves and wildfires, water and food shortages, extreme storms and floods, and increased disease and deaths amongst both animals and humans (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007; 2019). The 2007 assessment by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that failure to reduce GHG emissions will mean destroying ecosystems with catastrophic effects on many species, including humankind (IPCC 2007, 44). The Paris Agreement adds to the urgency because now everybody has to change their lifestyle in order to meet the agreement ("The Paris Agreement | UNFCCC" 2019). Governments search for ways to mitigate the effects of global warming (Jaspal, Turner, and Nerlich 2014) and citizens need to get informed about its status.

Citizens perceive climate change as a remote and 'unobtrusive' topic (Moser 2010) due to the way they have, or have not, been communicated to. Some journalists say there is no bigger story than climate change (Bregman 2019) - while others say there is none more fraught with traps and challenges (Stelter 2018). The story of climate change is both scientifically complex, as it is journalistically insidious. Climate change is a topic

that asks for action, because the time is ticking and the environment is not getting any better. Correspondent Jelmer Mommers puts it in the following way:

We all know the word “climate” carries a different weight these days. Threat. Danger. The past years experts told us in increasingly brisk words that the climate is changing, due to human exhaustion. This is not limited to one place, not only the Netherlands, or only in India, but at every place at the same time. They tell us about global warming, that sea levels threaten our harbor cities, that heat waves more regularly become unbearable, that worldwide food supply is under pressure. They tell us that continuing on our current road will lead us to a worldwide catastrophe – and that we are already being led into this catastrophe.¹
(Mommers 2019, 9)

Jelmer explains the urgency of the topic, and that it is a topic that matters to the whole world. The scope of the problem is global, yet journalists like Jelmer are still writing about it as if they have to wake up the world. Journalism that writes about climate change has the challenge of the scope of the problem, how it affects everybody, but also how it is ignored or not acknowledged by many. But, unlike other topics that can be ignored, the ignorance of climate change can mean that our world will be distracted in irreversible ways. The topic is urgent, emotional, but also polarizing². Not everybody wants to acknowledge that we, as humanity have to change our behavior and say farewell to many luxuries that are bad for the environment. Meanwhile others, like *The Guardian* are taking a stronger position about the topic.

¹ Maar we weten allemaal dat het woord ‘klimaat’ tegenwoordig een heel andere lading heeft. Dreiging. Gevaar. De afgelopen jaren vertellen experts ons in steeds fellere bewoordingen dat het klimaat door menselijk toedoen ingrijpend verandert. Niet op één plek, niet in Nederland óf in India, maar overal tegelijk. Ze vertellen ons dat de aarde opwarmt, dat zeespiegelstijging kuststeden bedreigt, dat hittegolven vaker ondraaglijk heet worden, dat de wereldwijde voedselvoorziening onder druk staat. Ze vertellen ons dat doorgaan op de huidige weg vrijwel zeker tot wereldwijde catastrofes zal leiden – en al leidt.

² The concept of “Polarization” is referred to by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the tendency to develop in two opposite directions in space, time, serial direction”.

“in our natural world, we refuse to turn away from the climate catastrophe and species extinction. For *The Guardian*, reporting on the environment is a priority. We give reporting on climate, nature and pollution the prominence it deserves, stories which often go unreported by others in the media. At this pivotal time for our species and our planet, we are determined to inform readers about threats, consequences and solutions based on scientific facts, not political prejudice or business interests.”
(Meade 2019)

Like *The Guardian*, a lot of journalism is taking a position about climate change. Strong voices around the urgent topic makes climate change a difficult writing topic. Journalists got stuck between a debate that challenges the future of journalism: how urgent are journalists allowed to write, about a topic that on itself challenges the future of our Earth? To what extent should journalism take its position about climate change and to what extent should it motivate citizens to do something about climate change? This is an urgent question that has to do with a fundamental quest: to what extent are activism and journalism interwoven.

This research is an ethnographic work that analyzes the process of journalism and how it is interrelated with activism. This process is examined on three levels: production, dissemination, and consumption of climate news.

1.2 DILEMMA'S OF CLIMATE JOURNALISM

Before all of this, the following paragraphs concisely introduce three ongoing debates about climate journalism. These debates contribute to the definition of the research scope and explore the considerations prior research offers in finding an answer to the research question underpinning the present work.

The quest for knowledge

Individuals often learn about climate change through information from media reporting (Schäfer 2015; Painter, Kristiansen, and Schäfer 2018) and articles shared on social media platforms (Hopke and Hestres 2018). Especially with respect to the dissemination of new scientific knowledge about climate change, Schäfer and Schlichting (2014) argue that media reporting can be considered as the most frequently used source of information. It is the main source of knowledge for both “ordinary” citizens as decision-makers alike (Schäfer and Schlichting 2014) and shape public opinions and perceptions of climate change (Liu et al. 2011; Painter, Kristiansen, and Schäfer 2018).

Research stresses the role of journalism in the formation of public opinion and understanding of scientific phenomena (Sumi 2007, 74; Fischer, Haucke, and Sundermann 2017). Van Witsen and Takahashi (2018) propose that journalism should be based on in-depth literature research and that journalists should be scientifically trained so that scientific findings will not be misrepresented or overstated due to limits of the research, ambiguous risk calculus, and complicated terminology. They define this as knowledge-based journalism should especially be conducted by climate journalists in order to ensure a safe flow of correct information (Van Witsen and Takahashi 2018). In the Netherlands, knowledge-based climate journalism is conducted by platforms like *Follow the Money* and *De Correspondent*. Their journalists writing on climate change are specialized experts on the own topic. Specialists write only about climate change, and commit their careers to understanding climate change sciences, while making it understandable to the Dutch audience.

However, knowledge-based journalism could be interpreted as if it has the authority to decide what is true. “Knowledge” could be perceived as a non-negotiable truth. While most researchers know that scientific findings are only true until they are proven to be wrong, this cannot be assumed to be common knowledge. Social studies of science have shown, science is always contextual and contingent (Carvalho 2007). Political, institutional, and personal factors restrict science and the assumptions that it is based on are often questionable (Latour 1987; Demeritt and Rothman 1999). Researchers might know that it would be a boasting claim to have found the truth. However, when a journalist describes a scientific finding, it is too easily presented as a fact. In the field of media studies focusing on climate change, Carvalho (2007) explains how some media perceive scientists as problem solvers and ultimate authorities of truth. Simultaneously Carvalho found that science was also criticized as being plural and open-ended by journalists. The contingent conditions of the production of science were often exposed. She explains that the variations in media discourses are caused by ideological factors (Carvalho 2007).

People desire to know what is true, especially about one of the biggest problems of our time: climate change. However, climate journalism is being questioned more often, especially since scientific findings have been overstated or misused, and this is enhanced by the difficulty of finding scientifically proven knowledge and truth. The debate about journalistic coverage of climate change takes place between journalists as well. Nisbet, a journalist writing for *Issues In Science And Technology*, argues that climate journalists must be extremely careful with accurately reporting knowledge (2010). Nisbet states that people do not know what to believe anymore: “They lose trust in the science

and in the journalism about the science, and the complexity of the issue is lost". According to Nisbet the debate about climate change is actually a battle about acquiring authority of knowledge. Thus, there are debates around journalism about which norms it should follow in representing knowledge.

The norm of objectivity

Not all online articles about climate change bring across the same message, which adds to the challenge of communicating climate change. Due to the diverse sources of information offered at various media landscapes, competing claims and narratives are promoted in the public sphere (Young and Dugas 2012). These competing claims and narratives, including the debates and disagreements that have dominated climate change issues since its "discovery" in the mid-1980s, are explained by the complexity of the topic (Young and Dugas 2012, 26). When complex scientific knowledge is presented by journalists substantial mistakes can be made in reporting about climate change. Bødker and Neverla (2012) say climate journalism deals with controversies that lie at the intersection of the scientific and the normative, in which advocacy or interest groups use scientific knowledge or data to lend legitimacy to their claims. In essence, around the topic of climate change there are various groups with different interests. These interests influence the way information is transferred. Due to those different interests, journalism is expected to cover an equal balance of opposite opinions and that news is reported in objective ways.

Objectivity, the fact of being based on facts and not influenced by personal beliefs or feelings, is an impossible human construct and has been downgraded to a journalistic strategic ritual that deflects criticism on journalistic work (Tuchman 1972). Just like methodology of anthropology acknowledges the impossibility to produce objective, value-free knowledge claims (O'Reilly 2012), journalists cannot produce objective, value-free knowledge claims. Instead of pretending that journalists are not opinionated and have no biases or faults, the concept of transparency implies that journalists are honest about their opinions, biases, or faults (Hiles and Hinnant 2014). Transparency is in essence openness and can be seen as an antidote for the distrust of readers (Hiles and Hinnant 2014). Many journalist advisory groups have advocated that newsrooms and journalistic platforms should be "as transparent as practical" in explaining to their readers how stories are collected, reported, and how the organization operates (Aspen Institute 2005). According to Weinberger (2009) transparency can give the readers information by which they can undo some unintended effects of ever-present biases. Transparency gives, in this way, a security of reliability and could contribute closing the "credibility gap" that

media faces (Aspen Institute 2005). Journalistic platforms could explain what they do by sharing the process of gathering and constructing stories, and share how they come about journalistic decisions (Moore 2009). As an organization, they can disclose institutional biases and financial conflicts. Next to transparency on the organizational level, individual journalists can increase their transparency by disclosing how their personal experiences, attitudes, and beliefs have influenced their work (Weinberger 2009). Finally, journalistic platforms could engage with their audience by letting their readers have some control over the conversation. These are all methods that can be applied in order to increase transparency.

The time to take action

The conflict between the scientific and the normative and the presence of inaccurate knowledge transfers are all problems that take place within journalism. It explains the public debates about how journalists, who produce a big part of media reporting, should engage with climate change and how it should be both embraced and used in the media (Fischer, Haucke, and Sundermann 2017).

we can't turn away from the climate crisis. For *The Guardian*, reporting on the environment is a priority. We give reporting on climate, nature and pollution the prominence it deserves, stories which often go unreported by others in the media. At this pivotal time for our species and our planet, we are determined to inform readers about threats, consequences and solutions based on scientific facts, not political prejudice or business interests.
(Carrington 2019)

This recently published article from *The Guardian* is an example of a trend within journalism: platforms are becoming more outspoken in their editorial conviction (Carrington 2019). The conviction of *The Guardian* demonstrated a form of journalistic activism. By using words and selecting news, this activist journalism aims to increase knowledge about climate change, enhance a state of urgency, and stimulate sustainable behavior. Painter, Kristiansen, and Schafer declare that climate change is a great contemporary challenge for humanity today and agree that this urgent topic needs activism (2018). *The Guardian's* new guidelines apply the terminology of scientific research (Carrington 2019), which help to not misrepresent or overstate findings (in line with guidelines from Van Witsen and Takahashi (2018)). It remains however unclear how journalism can be activist about climate change, without becoming an activist organization instead of journalism.

Since many have shown the scope of the challenge of climate change (Painter, Kristiansen, and Schäfer 2018), action is indispensable. However, “saving the planet” is limited by human self-interest. Globally governments get stuck in endless international squabbles about blame and responsibility (Wu 2009, 159). An alternative approach to handle the problem of climate change is by asking citizens to adjust their behavior. If citizens endorse environmental sustainability, it might be possible to move beyond the constraints of national self-interest (Lewis and Boyce “2009, 4).

In a recent article on *The New York Times* Marc Tracy talked about the changing landscape of climate journalism (2019). It describes the union of five newspapers in Florida in order to convey a stronger message around climate change. The executive editor of one of these outlets stated that the partnership was not politically motivated. “We’re not launching a campaign,” she said. “We’re launching information, knowledge.” (Tracy 2019). Nisbet (2019) wrote a plea on Issues In Science And Technology, arguing that climate journalists must be extremely careful with finding balance between activism and accurate journalism. He points out different headlines, covering the IPCC report:

Headlines reporting on the 2018 IPCC report verged on dystopian. “Major climate report describes a strong risk of crisis as early as 2040,” warned *The New York Times*. “The world has just over a decade to get climate change under control, UN scientists say,” echoed *The Washington Post*. “We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe,” predicted *The Guardian*. “New UN climate report dims hope for averting catastrophic global warming,” declared *The Huffington Post*. “UN says climate genocide is coming. It’s actually worse than that,” was the headline at *New York Magazine*.’
(Nisbet 2019)

The titles that are spread online are dangerous, according to Nisbet. Let alone the labels that are often used for unlike minded writers:

To protect preferred narratives about climate change and its solutions, a main strategy by some activist scientists and writers has been to discredit experts who question these worse-case scenario narratives or the related advocated policies by labeling them “deniers,” “delayers,” “contrarians,” “confusionists,” and “lukewarmers,” as the journalist Keith Kloor has documented. These attacks are not so much about the specifics of climate science or policy, but instead about controlling who has the authority to speak on the subject.

Such labeling comports well with the political mood of the day: it breeds incivility and cultivates a discourse culture where protecting one's own identity, group, and preferred storyline takes priority over constructive consideration of knowledge and evidence.
(Nisbet 2019)

While being the primary means through which climate change has been communicated, media has also proved to shape public awareness (Bell 1994). However, there are public reactions to this issue that are hard to understand. For instance, they have often resisted relevant changes in behavior (Exley and Christie 2003). Thus, the challenge of climate change is also a challenge of communication about climate change. Researchers argue that climate change communicators should consider the prevailing attitudes, values, and psychological “needs” of their audiences (Crompton and Kasser 2010; Kahan 2010). Jaspal, Turner, and Nerlich (2014) took this on board and made an integrative model of theoretical observations, linked to individual psychological desires. They explain how factors like social representation, self-identity, and socio-psychological action could help determine how individuals and groups deal with climate change as a complex problem and take ownership of it (Jaspal, Turner, and Nerlich 2014).

Activism can be both alarming or activating. By trying to offer possible solutions it attempts to activate. However, psychological research shows that a message that attempts to activate or nudge sustainable behavior can result in stronger resistance. Across six experiments, including one conducted with individuals involved in policy making, Hagmann and Loewenstein (2019) show that introducing a green energy default nudge diminishes support for a carbon tax. They propose that nudges decrease support for substantive policies by providing false hope that problems can be tackled without imposing considerable costs. Activating journalism is often showing the frame of urgency (crisis) and responsibility (it is not too late / this is what you can do). Is it arguable that activism within journalism would have the opposite effect of its intentions? For example, can the responsibility frame (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000) decrease support since they often present the inevitable state of the current climate, and meanwhile provide seemingly “easy” solutions. Is it arguable that this alarming and activating message is perceived as bringing false hope?

Collectively, the present body of research suggests that climate journalists should conduct knowledge-based journalism (Van Witsen and Takahashi 2018), through which they give contextual background information without giving too much space to scepticism and doubts. In the section above it is argued that

an equal balance of climate sceptical and climate acknowledging coverage is no longer needed. It would, however, be a positive addition to climate journalism if journalists and their platforms are transparent about their methods and if they would include interaction with their readers. This would help journalists to gain their trust. If a journalist wants to stimulate environmentally-friendly behavior, it is useful to present the urgency of the problem parallel to possible environmental actions. The debates around climate journalism on who has the authority of knowledge, journalistic norms, and activism, illustrate the ongoing dialogue between climate journalism and activism.

Research question

In this thesis, the combination of journalism and activism is observed in journalism in The Netherlands, for example at *De Correspondent*. *De Correspondent* started in 2013 and is a journalist-based platform, this means that journalists have their own expertise and can determine what they write about and how they voice their findings. Their writing topics are, in contrast to traditional newspapers, not restricted by the wishes of editors or current affairs. This gives space to climate journalists to become experts on the specific topic they write about and to choose what is important enough to publish. Unlike most traditional newspapers, this merely online platform acknowledges the fact that nobody is objective, nor do they claim to be objective. Correspondents openly confess their ideologies and opinions around the topic of climate change. Nonetheless, *De Correspondent* promotes knowledge-based journalism (Witsen and Takahashi 2018) in a way that news must be reported within its context and information is presented with more detail and care (Het Manifest, *De Correspondent* 2019). By both acknowledging its subjectivity and involving readers into the process of a correspondent, *De Correspondent* profiles itself as transparent journalism. By explaining news within its context by experts on the specific topic, *De Correspondent* profiles itself as conducting knowledge-based and, in their own words, contextual journalism. In line with advisory from academic research, *De Correspondent* conducts transparent journalism that gives context to the news, and builds its stories on research, done by specialized correspondent.

The case of *De Correspondent* is an example of Dutch journalism that tries to produce knowledge-based journalism, while giving the freedom to journalists to take an activist position. Thus far, this research has discussed the urgency of climate change, the responsibility of the individual citizen, the role of journalism as a provider of knowledge and information, the challenge of communicating about climate change, the inconsistency of climate reporting due to different interests, the way knowledge-based

journalism should protect from misrepresentation, activating journalism, and the public resistance against its influence. Given these points, it is of importance to investigate the intersection of climate activism and climate journalism. This research explores how knowledge-based journalism and activism are interwoven in reporting on climate change. This question is in line with the dilemma often discussed in anthropology sciences: when one has a remarkable amount of knowledge about the wrongs in the world, ought this person not take action to change the situation of which he or she learned about (Low and Merry 2010). The case of *De Correspondent* was chosen due to several reasons. Firstly, it follows a combination of guidelines based on scientific findings. Secondly, it is exclusively online journalism. Thirdly, because it has the ideology of bringing progress to their surrounding, implying that they make an effort to have an influence on readers through their writing, if the topic asks for action.

The findings of this research attempts to make sense of being knowledgeable and being activist. It is a review about what takes place behind the scene of a journalistic platform that integrates knowledge-based journalism with activism. It makes sense of the dilemma between knowledge and activism. The research question is *how is climate journalism interwoven with activism and how does this interaction manifest throughout the production, dissemination, and consumption of articles about climate change?*

This ethnographic research attempts to clarify context and underlying patterns within activist climate journalism. These findings might help to make sense of the balance, relation, or differentiation between climate journalism and activism.

1.3 INTEGRATED METHODOLOGY

How climate journalism is interwoven with activism and how this manifests, is explored through various qualitative research methods at different research stages of the journalistic process. The methodology is a set of tools apt to capture, understand, and describe the human experience within social contexts. The theoretical approach adopts an interpretative stance, which posits the social world as inherently perceived and constructed by actors and agencies. It acknowledges the impossibility to produce objective, value-free knowledge claims (O'Reilly 2012), which is why personal evaluations are made throughout the research.

The initial stage of this research consisted of data collection of existing academic and non-academic literature, and online journalistic articles to form the fundamental theory. A variety of keywords were used in search engines, such as *Google Scholar*, *Anthrosource*, *Abstracts in Anthropology*, and *Scopus*. Other, mainly Dutch, journalistic platforms were explored,

including *de Volkskrant*, *De Correspondent*, *Trouw*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *One World*, and *Follow the Money*. Articles were selected on the thematic integration of activism, climate change, and journalism.

Having collected the fundamental theory, the methodology of this research was further informed by the conception of ethnography as a practice, giving rise to embodied, descriptive, and storied knowledge (O'Reilly 2012). The online and theoretical stage of this research was combined with interviews conducted with several journalists from various newspapers that were also explored during the online research: *De Correspondent*, *One World*, *Follow the Money* and, *Trouw*.

In order to expand the collection of data, different options to triangulate the findings were investigated. Thus, extensive ethnographic fieldwork was operationalized during a four-month internship with *De Correspondent*. The ethnographic research during this period included: participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011), ethnographic interviews, and sensory ethnography. The research methodology is chiefly informed by the conception of ethnography as a practice, giving rise to embodied, descriptive, and storied knowledge (O'Reilly 2012).

Participant observations (DeWalt and Dewalt 2011) included working with and for team engagement, which handles the dissemination of articles. By joining team engagement, it was possible to conduct participant observations of editors, journalists, and the general company culture. Furthermore, participant observations were conducted at public events where a journalist of the case at hand interacted with live audiences. Critical Discourse Analysis (Janks 1997) was used to analyze the content and the tone of voice of an article, as well as the added images of the article, and the online conversations and comments that followed underneath an article or on social media. This method sees language as a form of social practice. By evaluating the positioning of a text, and whose interests are served or neglected, it is possible to clarify relations of power. When analysis attempts to understand how discourse is implicated in relations of power, this is called critical discourse analysis (Janks 1997, 329).

Carvalho (2007) examined framing and portrayal of climate change in the British press through critical discourse analysis. This form of research focuses on language and on the way discourses and specific political, social, and cultural contexts interact. This makes it possible to investigate specific aspects of climate change coverage, which can be cross-checked by other quantitative research. Within this current research, the observations of critical discourse analysis were discussed with the journalist via interviews including the editorial "colleagues". This is to assess how journalists evaluate their own work and

The position of an anthropologist

When analyzing journalistic articles, one can read a text from the perspective of being engaged or being estranged with the text at hand. Both positions of the readers result in different conclusions of an analyzed text. Engagement without estrangement implies that one submits to the power of the text regardless of the reader's own positions. On the opposite hand, estrangement without engagement is a refusal to leave the confines of one's own subjectivity – it is a refusal of allowing others to enter. However, if nothing is allowed to enter one's realm of thoughts, is it possible to claim that the reader read the text at all (Janks 1997, 331)?

The position of estrangement without engagement was applied to the researcher before integration into and active engagement with the journalistic platform *De Correspondent*. Several platforms were approached for interviews with various journalists and editors (either freelancers or committed to one platform). The climate change acknowledging journalists responded somewhat averting to the questions or claimed to have never thought about certain questions (fieldnotes, March 18, 2019). This gave birth to my point of view that these “climate change acknowledging journalists”, who were so passionate about financial consequences of emissions, must have something to hide. In order to develop an understanding of what interview behavior had to be changed, I observed titles from online articles and found them instrumental in directing me to what kind of behavior I ought to adapt. The moment my impressions of left-winged and green journalists that have something to hide and are somehow drawing politics, got confirmed, was when I spoke with journalist Marcel Crok, he is a journalist who is specialized in the debate about climate change. Marcel Crok is one of the few Dutch climate journalists who doubts the effects of climate change and backs up his claims with science. During our interview, I started to doubt myself, my activism against climate change, and whether the “left-winged” journalists were truly speaking the truth. Why was I so easily persuaded to doubt these proven scientific facts? I probably had observed many things in the media that made me second-guess climate journalists. What all those observations were, I did not realize at the time, and I desired to discover these reasons for doubt throughout my qualitative research. However, there was also a clear reason why I started to trust “the sceptics” more. Marcel Crok was the most open and gentle journalist I had spoken to until then. In contrast with the other interviews I conducted with climate journalists, he did not seem to hide anything and shared an overload of knowledge and personal experience.

Afterwards, when I applied for an internship at *De Correspondent*, I was not sure how to feel. My attitude was already drifting to estrangement without engagement. It was only when I got to know the team of *De Correspondent* that I started to adjust my thoughts again. Through observing myself wavering from activism to sceptic thoughts to being engaged again, I came to know a deeper understanding of how our opinions can be influenced by more than only rational arguments. The factors of influence had to do with genuine appearance, averting behavior, and behavior enforcing texts. The feeling that someone is trying to influence me without the assurance that they are trustworthy, made me resist their texts.

According to Janks (1997, 331), there are many factors that tip the scales in favor of engagement. In order to compare theoretical research next to the reality of journalism in The Netherlands, integration into a company was needed in order to draw direct observations and go beyond first impressions. Also, by analyzing my personal ideas throughout the fieldwork, the researcher could be considered a case as well: one individual who changes her opinion and engagement of climate friendly behavior due to the different forms of communication about climate change. This is an example of why ethnographic research is valuable: it explores contextual and social explanations for seemingly unexplainable results.

Apart from individual evaluation, this research was also ensured of ethical conduct by seeking and receiving approval from the head of the Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship faculty at Utrecht University. All direct participants were informed of the purpose of the study. Subjects were permitted to maintain confidentiality. The journalistic platform *De Correspondent* was provided the option to review used quotes and observations and a copy of the final interpretation of data. Online commentators, who are merely observed without being informed of the study, were only mentioned by their first name. Finally, it is important to note that data was collected during an internship by a student, commissioned by Utrecht University, *not* commissioned by *De Correspondent*.

Academic relevance

According to Dirikx and Gelders (“Global Warming Through the Same Lens” 2009, 205) conducted research on journalistic coverage of climate change within Europe can be divided into two topics: the balance in sources in the reporting and the tone of the media coverage. Contrary to the current body of research, this study explores the lengthy process of journalism within an organization. Its academic relevance lies in that journalistic work is not seen as an individual piece of work, but by a product that gets formed and reformed through the stages of production, dissemination, and consumption.

By ethnographically exploring the journalistic process, this research presents a contextual analysis of climate journalism and its relationship with activism. Through participatory observation, the challenges of climate journalism were partially experienced by the researcher. These experiences result in insightful fieldwork, which can only be found when a researcher is simultaneously an outsider, as well an insider. Through this methodology, this research produces a clear overview of how climate journalism is interwoven with activism, and a relevant contribution to research on Dutch journalism.

Societal relevance and ethical responsibility

The societal relevance of this research lies in that both the Dutch audience as well as Dutch journalists should understand why climate journalism and activism is often confused with each other or seen as unquestionably connected. By gaining a better understanding of how climate journalism and activism influence each other, it is easier to recognize where it is causing problems of transparency and trust amongst both constructs. Finally, by recognizing the structural problems, climate journalism can professionalize itself and gain trust from its readers.

This research also implies some ethical responsibilities. It is important to note that this thesis is not written in assignment of *De Correspondent*. Whenever comments of readers from *De Correspondent* are discussed, only public discussions are considered and no reference is made to its location on the Internet or full name due to privacy reasons. The links are exclusively filed in personal fieldnotes. Furthermore, it is relevant to realize the sensitivity of this research topic. Climate journalists want to be trusted while simultaneously try to tackle climate scepticism. During the first interview with Loudi, she reminded me to be “aware of the possibility to evoke even more environmental ignorance by publishing a critical analysis of climate journalism” (Interview Loudi, March 14, 2019). Hopefully, the findings of the research have no negative implications that can be used by climate sceptics.

28 The research at hand started with interviews. Chapter two deals with theory and interviews with a selection of climate journalists. It aims to contextualize the research topic. I come to the conclusion that in order to answer the research question, it is necessary to conduct ethnographic research. The case of this ethnographic research is introduced by the end of chapter two. Chapter three gives an understanding of how journalistic articles are produced and how, in the production process, involved actors make sense of activism. Chapter four talks about the dissemination of articles and looks into the online interaction between writers and readers. Chapter five explores how articles are consumed.

CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW



The following chapter introduces the research context in combination with the first phase of fieldwork, which was conducted as an orientation of the current climate of journalism. Together the theoretical and fieldwork descriptions of Dutch journalism on climate change form the context of this research. Thereafter, the research's societal and academic relevance will be highlighted.

2.1 WHAT THEORY EXPLAINS ABOUT DUTCH JOURNALISM ON CLIMATE CHANGE

If the tone of voice of a journalist is somewhat activating, one could argue that it should be considered as activist journalism. But by combining the words journalism and activism, a sensitive topic is touched upon. The prominent moment when the sensitivity of the topic became noticeable was when CNN reporter Brian Stelter put an item online (in March 2018), about a young journalist who spoke her mind about the partnership between journalism and activism. Public intellectuals and famous journalists spoke their minds on Twitter on the topic. Stelter followed-up with a review about the tumult and online discussion between prominent journalists.

“Journalism isn’t activism; it’s presenting the facts, honestly, and objectively. It’s this mentality that’s killing trust in our profession,” he wrote. Kraushaar said he didn’t want to single out Schneid, but “this mentality, at least from my experience, is more common among younger journalists.”

Los Angeles Times national correspondent Matt Pearce took the other side. “Journalism is activism in its most basic form,” he wrote. “The entire basis for its ethical practice is the idea that a democracy requires an informed citizenry in order to function. Choosing what you want people to know is a form of activism, even if it’s not the march-and-protest kind.”

Pearce's point was that newsrooms are constantly picking and choosing what's worthy of coverage and what isn't.

Deciding what belongs on the front page of the paper is the classic example of this.

Pearce added: “Does anybody think that even the fairest and most diligent of investigative reporters wrote their horrifying stories hoping that nothing would change?”

(Stelter 2018)

The intersection of journalism and activism is a debate, influenced by emotions and trust-issues. This research paper does not aim to differentiate activism and journalism, but to explore their interaction. The applied definition of activist journalism in this research is as it is defined by the Oxford Dictionary of

Journalism: “The use of journalistic skills within activist media to report on, and inspire (political) engagement with, one or more [...]” (2019).

According to the previous discussed debates, there are three guidelines for activist journalism. Firstly, it should be knowledge-based in order to protect from overstating or misusing information for its own interest. Secondly, instead of claiming to be objective, it should do its best to be transparent. Third, climate journalism that aim to share their activist convictions should be aware of the challenges of climate change communication and beware for unexpected negative effects.

Framing

Journalism has the power to “set the agenda” for the public. As Cohen wrote in 1963, “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (McCombs and Bell 1996, 106). McCombs and Shaw (1972) found a strong correlation between the coverage of prominent media and the topics seen as important by the public. Media platforms made certain topics prominent and brought them to the attention of their audiences. Agenda-setting theory, as defined by McCombs and Bell, explained *which* topics are covered by the media, specifically journalism. Another theory, also known as “second-order agenda setting” (Ghanem 1997), looks at *how* the media, or journalists, cover those issues: framing.

Framing is a theory, based on psychology, which teaches us that every individual interprets life experiences in their own ways and they come to a decision differently (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 11). Media and journalists help their audiences to interpret and discuss public events by setting frames. For journalists, it is difficult to avoid framing their stories. They are forced to choose themes, sources, and constructions, which help them build a narrative (Liebler and Bendix 1996). This causes every journalist or journalistic platform to take a position within a story.

Climate journalism in The Netherlands

Dutch journalism is no stranger to the use of frames. Dirikx and Gelders have explored if and how five frames, or interpretation frameworks, are used in the Dutch news media (2009). The media framing they apply in their research is based on the five frames defined by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). The five generic frames are explained by Semetko and Valkenburg as the following (2000): when climate change is framed according to (1) the *responsibility frame*, it is presented in a way that the political authorities, individuals, or groups are made responsible for the cause or the solution. (2) The *conflict frame* emphasizes conflicts

between parties or individuals and stresses the points of divergence between opponents. When climate change is presented from an emotional point of view, it is seen as (3) the *human interest frame*. When an article emphasizes on the manner in which an issue will (economically) affect people, it is seen as (4) the *(economic) consequences frame*. Finally, (5) the *morality frame* presents the situation from a moral or religious angle. The same coding method to analyze frames in journalism (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000) is conducted to analyze Dutch climate change reporting by Dirikx and Gelders (2009). They concluded that Dutch climate change articles are mostly presented in the form of longer news pieces that offer background information (2009, 209), and that the fact that Dutch climate change reporting often contains background information may help the readers better understand climate change, while at the same time make them more certain of its existence and consequences. The presented knowledge in climate journalism can stimulate environmentally friendly behavior.

The same research shows that Dutch journalism often frames climate change within the responsibility frame and the (economic) consequences frame (Dirikx and Gelders 2009, 209). They observed the need for urgent actions in Dutch articles, in combination with commonly referenced possible solutions. Climate change was, and is, presented as a real and dangerous threat, but not without the diverse ways in which people can help to avoid these negative consequences. This is in line with the “protection motivation theory” which states that people who are confronted with threatening, but treatable issues, will be motivated to change their behavior (Maddux and Rogers 1983). If the message is merely alarming, or if the threat is bigger than a possible solution, the message can lead to rejection of the proposed measures, or even met with resistance. Dirikx and Gelders conclude that the framing of climate change in The Netherlands promotes scientific certainty and has the potential to increase citizen’s knowledge of and actions against climate change (2009, 210).

Based on these findings Dirikx and Gelders (2009, 203) claim that the way climate change is framed by journalists can have an important effect on the public’s understanding of the environmental changes and the actions that people are willing to undertake.

2.2 MEETING DUTCH CLIMATE JOURNALISTS

In order to find what motivations or behavior patterns are behind climate journalism, and to find to what extent journalists review their own activism, a variety of climate journalists were approached for this research.

Loudi is a young freelance journalist writing for *One World* and *Algemeen Dagblad*. The first news platform is known to be young, modern, and activistic. The latter has a more traditional image and covers primary daily news. In a long and entertaining phone call, the 24-year-old journalist describes her work for *One World* and the topics she writes for them, the ones she enjoys the most.

I aim to write positive and constructive stories about characters that believe the world can be a better place, but that it is up to ourselves to do something about it. The scientific findings that confirm or doubt climate change are not covered by me. People don't want to know the nitty gritty about a research anymore anyway. Either way, the readers of *One World* already know that climate change is real and that we should take action – now. People want to know what they must do! (Interview Loudi, March 14, 2019).

Loudi sees herself as an activist journalist. It is easy to assume that this is motivated by her work for *One World*, however it does not necessarily support her work at *Algemeen Dagblad*. On March 10, 2019 approximately 40.000 people marched through the drenching rain in Amsterdam, The Netherlands to demonstrate for the climate. Throughout the whole day images of smiling soaked young people were spread online, while holding up ironic signs about the state of our climate. On social media some public figures were seen, such as Political leader Jesse Klaver (the head of GroenLinks, a green political party in The Netherlands). The march is dominated by young people, more female than male. Apart from “tree huggers”, there are also parties present that attempt to establish an environment-friendly image. Many journalistic platforms send out a call to join the climate march in their articles on previous day (Fieldnotes, March 10, 2019). Journalist Jelmer Mommers even sent a personal e-mail out, calling everybody to come to the march (Mommers, 2019). This is the correspondent who specifically focuses on climate change and sustainability for *De Correspondent*. He openly confesses he's not merely a journalist, but also an activist. When Loudi is asked how she approached the reporting of the climate march, she explained the difference between *One World* and *Algemeen Dagblad*.

Of course I was also at the climate march. Many of the personnel of *One World* was present. But the next day, when I came to the editorial office of *Algemeen Dagblad* in Rotterdam, my colleagues did not find my presence that obvious at all. Some said we should've all been there, others said we

should never join opinionated events like this. We must remain objective, they said. Well, I disagree. How one earth can I be objective anyway? Everyone has an opinion! Of course I shouldn't throw my opinion out there. I am not writing columns. But I shouldn't pretend as if I'm objective either. (Interview Loudi, March 14, 2019).

It is interesting to explore to what extent activist journalists are thinking about how they could move their readers into action for the climate. "I've never thought about how I would be most effective in changing behavior, or if what I'm doing is the way to go," Loudi slowly concludes after she thought about the question for almost ten seconds. "I just want to do my work well, and do it quickly." After finishing up the last question, she makes haste to add, "One more thing: climate change is not a topic for one interest group. It matters to all of us. Everybody's life is at stake when it comes to climate change – not just the lives of green political parties." (Interview Loudi, March 14, 2019).

Marcel Crok

The next person that is interviewed, stands on the other side of the spectrum compared to Loudi. His tone of voice in our e-mail correspondence, in combination with his critical articles and the way other journalists write about him, gives the impression that he has become a bitter and angry climate critic (Interview Crok, March 11, 2019). However, during the personal interview, at his "favorite coffee place", Marcel turns out to be rather friendly and polite. He profiles himself as a genuine fact-checker and research journalist: "I am an independent journalist, not restricted by financial support or directory guidelines from a platform." According to Crok, his independence and his educational background is why he is trustworthy. He acknowledges climate change is true, but believes a lot of models are too sensitive. Crok legitimizes himself by explaining that he lives very "green" "I'm not a climate sceptic. I'm actually quite 'green', if you check my behavior. I don't have a car – never had one, and my daughter is the bicycle mayor of Amsterdam." He hates the label of a climate sceptic.

"They delegitimize anything I say and I am not taken serious. Even though I can prove their models are too sensitive. Climate change is not that bad as IPCC predicts. Their models are way too sensitive. Which is good news, if you ask me! I simply means that we have more time. I don't try to motivate people to act less environmentally friendly, but I am trying to prove that the models are wrong. The IPCC has something to hide. They are trying to make it seem worse than it is. I don't know for what reasons but it is evil. Why can't they admit that they are wrong?!"

"People need to know what's the truth", Crok emphasizes one last time. "And they should trust an independent and knowledgeable journalist. Not just any quick sharp writer that doesn't know shit about climate science – who's, by the way, just out to silence me." (Interview Crok, March 18, 2019).

Trouw

Following the interview with Marcel Cork, is the conversation with Jeroen, chief editor at climate and sustainability rubric at *Trouw*. "So, you think we are trying to change people's behavior," he starts off. "Not really... I am exploring how climate journalists are, aware or unaware, changing behavior" (Contact Jeroen, March 12, 2019). Jeroen replies, "Well, we are not doing that. Our journalism is objective and based on research. It is our responsibility to translate scientific truths to the bigger audience. We focus on helping the reader to make more sustainable decisions. This is the desire of our readers. We base this sustainable focus on the letters of readers – like every newspaper does." When Jeroen is asked about platforms who talk about climate change differently, he points the finger at a competing newspaper de *Telegraaf*. "De *Telegraaf* is guilty of propaganda. They only care about getting the highest click-rates. It is the opposite of what *Trouw* is."

To the question about what individual assumptions influences their work, he responds by saying that their journalism is genuine and that they deliberately choose to include or exclude certain news. Some answers from Jeroen seem a bit defensive. As if I am asking very strange questions that I should not be asking. The talk with Marcel and Jeroen were both helping me to understand why distrust in journalism can easily be caused. Marcel by his distrust in a lot of journalism, and Jeroen due to his defensive answers.

Follow the Money

Ties works for *Follow the Money*, a platform based on research journalism. He describes his work: "I love digging into a topic and writing contextual analyzes. I consider my work to be constructive, thorough, and solution driven." His work is based on the fact that climate change exists and that we must do something about it. "The relevance of our work is that topics that are hidden from citizens, are unraveled. We are not writing articles that are most read – we write about the things that matter" (Interview Ties, March 22, 2019).

Concluding the interviews, various statements stand out. Firstly, none of the interviewees said that they are actively thinking about how to influence the behavior of readers. They all say that analyzing one's own work on that level, is impossible if they

also want to do their work well. Secondly, all four interviewees say that it is irrelevant anyway: we have to move now and fast. Even though they do not acknowledge attempts of trying to stimulate certain behavior, most of them claim to be constructive. Especially Loudi from *One World* and science journalist Crok, even though their approaches are opposite, would be considered activist journalists. They disagree about the state of our climate and Loudi covers news about what you can do (practical), while Crok focuses on the wrongs of climate science (theoretical). Crok and Jeroen claim that objective and independent journalism is the only way journalism should be conducted. Ties and Loudi both say objectivity is an illusion. All interviewees claim to conduct research based journalism. Finally, Crok is alone in his conviction that journalism should make space for doubts about climate science. Even though he acknowledges that climate change is truly happening – like each of the journalists do. However, none of the other journalists think journalism should invest another minute in climate scepticism or doubts.

In every interview the question was asked if he or she was purposely trying to influence behavior of their readers. All four of the interviewees said not to be aware of how and when their work causes engagement or activates citizens. The direct link between climate journalism and activism is not obvious enough to explore with interviews. In order to find the structural interaction between climate journalism and activism, it is necessary to research the the journalistic process instead of just a single encounter/interview. By integrating into the journalistic direct and participatory observation can be conducted and structural patterns can be both recognized and analyzed. Thus, I applied for an internship at *De Correspondent*.

2.3 GETTING TO KNOW DE CORRESPONDENT

De Correspondent is an ad-free, online journalism platform that attempts to get around the flaws of journalism and news. Their goal is to produce in-depth, solution-focused journalism in a collaborative setting with members who trust them in doing so: their paying members. It was founded in 2013 by journalist Rob Wijnberg, creative director Harald Dunnink, CTO Sebastian Kersten, and publisher Ernst-Jan Pfauth. After a record-breaking crowdfunding campaign in the spring of 2013, which attracted 18,933 members and raised more than \$1.7 million, *De Correspondent* was launched on the 30th of September that same year. The money was raised on the promise to be “jouw medicijn tegen de waan van de dag”, or loosely translated into English: “an antidote to the grind of daily news”. Since 2013, they have been steadily growing by over a thousand members a month. It is now one of the largest, ad-free, member-funded platforms of its kind in Europe (*De Correspondent* 2019).

De Correspondent wants to radically change what news is about, how it is made, and how it is funded. They observed today's newspapers and news platforms as churning out sensationalist, speculative and fear-inducing headlines that grab readers' attention yet leave them uninformed. *De Correspondent* want to offer something different during a time of journalism, that they describe as stereotyping, leaving people cynical, clickbait news that affirm readers' views (Wijnberg 2018).

They do not use adverts, design tweaks to merely generate clicks, or anything they consider as distracting 'noise'. Instead, their model runs on their members' trust in them to deliver writing that keeps them informed, engaged with the world and emboldened to take action (Het Manifest, *De Correspondent* 2019)). By following the journalistic process, while working in the organization, it is possible to broaden the case from the individual to an entire process between people. Now the interaction between climate journalism and activism can be observed over the full length of the process from production to consumption. The tone of voice an article or a journalist is not merely determined by the writer of an article, but also by the editors, social media team (team engagement), co-writers, campaign leaders, and finally: the readers. All stakeholders influence how activist the journalism will become. These stakeholders can be divided into three groups: production, dissemination, and consumption. The production involves the initiating journalistic platform, the editors, and the journalist. The second group handles the dissemination of articles. Within this group are social media editors team engagement, campaign leaders, writers of newsletters, and sometimes, the book publishers. All these tasks belong in *De Correspondent* to team Engagement and the publishers. The final group that has influence on how an article is understood, are its readers. On social media and the news-platform itself, journalistic articles are shared and talked about. Readers often read what has been said by "peers" or fellow-readers. This influences the tone-of-voice of the message as a whole as well.

Observing De Correspondent as a user

When using *De Correspondent*'s own search capabilities, you will find 592 articles including the word "climate change" and 50 articles with the full phrase in the title. The phrase global warming, or "opwarming" in Dutch, finds another 298 articles about the effects of global warming, written by a variety of journalists. Often, global warming is the focus of these article or it is integrated into other, closely related topics. The archive of *De Correspondent* withholds 1126 articles that talk about the "climate". Here are some examples of titles:

Our approach to climate change has gone bankrupt. When will we wake up?⁴

Thirty years ago we could've stopped a catastrophic climate change. This story explains why we didn't⁵

Climate change threatens everything we love. But how bad it will be, is up to us.⁶

Each of these titles are more than descriptions of news, they are conclusions about the state of climate change and the role humanity plays in it. From this selection of titles from *De Correspondent*, each title calls for a form of action from its readers: “movement”, “will we wake up”, “could've stopped”, “up to use. Another thing that stands out is that climate change is personified: “climate change demands” “climate change has gone bankrupt”, “stopped climate change”, and “climate threatens”. It is very possible to replace climate change with a random name of an individual – let's say Johnny. We – the people – abused Johnny. Now we need to compensate for all the bad we did to Johnny, or Johnny will make us suffer. The story about climate change is a personal story and journalists writing for *De Correspondent* seem to take on the responsibility in making us aware of the need for action.

3 Klimaatverandering vraagt om een wereldwijde volksbeweging

4 Onze aanpak van klimaatverandering is failliet. Wanneer worden we wakker?

5 Dertig jaar geleden konden we catastrofale klimaatverandering nog voorkomen. Dit verhaal verklaart waarom we het niet deden

6 Klimaatverandering bedreigt alles wat ons lief is. Maar hoe erg het wordt, bepalen we zelf

Not everybody is fond of this journalistic approach. In Rotterdam, during the entrepreneurial network event *Venture Café*, *De Correspondent* is discussed with some other attendees. A Dutch entrepreneur from Rotterdam calls *De Correspondent* “an left-winged club in Amsterdam who claim to know the truth and force their opinions on you” (Fieldnotes on network event, April 4, 2019). This is not the only time a similar verdict is heard or seen (Fieldnotes, first day *De Correspondent*, April 16, 2019). *De Correspondent* positions itself as critical, but their online activity could also come across as opinionated, filled with bold assumptions based on short analyzes. It gives the impression as if they have the authority to tell the rest of the world what is right or wrong.

The editorial office of *De Correspondent* turns out to be more approachable than outside observations imply. Their online image is determined by avatars, titles, online engagement, and introductions of articles. This can be interpreted as strongly opinionated and/or trying to tell the world to become more like them. However, at the editorial office, it is evident that there are many different opinions, and that staff often have different views on how to position the platform (Fieldnotes, first day *De Correspondent*, April 16, 2019).

Welcome to the family of De Correspondent

As a user of *De Correspondent* platform, it is difficult to determine who is behind the bold titles and the experimental way of journalism. However, the atmosphere within the company is open and social. Editors, programmers, and writers all work in the same office space. *De Correspondent* has about 40 full-time employees, who work to produce contextual journalism for their 60.000 readers. *De Correspondent* aims to be the Dutch leader of activating, deeply researched journalism. They strive to be a podium where journalists and their paying members can share their knowledge and experiences. *De Correspondent* practices journalism through social interaction. This means that the correspondents are interacting with their readers in order to get new information, sources, experiences, and expertise. They believe 1000 readers know more than one journalist, and this is practiced through asking for the help from readers (Het Manifest, *De Correspondent* 2019). Their mission is to radically change what news is about, how it is made, and how it is funded. As a movement, guided by journalists, they aim to reveal the deeper structures that shape the world, achieve a better understanding of current problems, and search for solutions. They aim to bring insight to their readers by maintaining content that is understandable without prior knowledge of the subject. The journalists of *De Correspondent* are profiled as individual journalists with individual ideas. In contrast to many other journalistic

42 platforms, you can personally follow a correspondent. This is done by always showing their face via an avatar⁷, by using their names in online posts, and through individual newsletters. They do not want to be sensational, but they are outspoken about their convictions. They want to be stimulating, activating, and are openly opinionated and subjective (Fieldnotes, first week *De Correspondent*, April 19, 2019). Through these values *De Correspondent* and its journalists stand for contextual, constructive, transparent, social, independent, and sincere journalism (Het Manifest, *De Correspondent* 2019).

Thus far it is discussed that there exists a difference between what *De Correspondent* is and how it can be perceived from the outside. Apart from what *De Correspondent* attempts to be and does, their ways of doing so are at times different from what people expect of journalism. In the next chapters *De Correspondent* will be explored behind the scene, within its daily practice. This will give a further understanding of how they deal with their goals on a daily base and how these practices make sense about climate journalism and activism.

⁷ At the beginning of chapter III, IV and V you will find examples of avatars. Instead of showing the journalists' faces, *De Correspondent* presents their correspondents with drawn faces: avatars.

HOW CLIMATE CHANGE IS PUTTING JOURNALISM ON THE SPOT



The following chapter analyzes in what ways climate activism is interwoven with the production of journalistic articles. Based on the three debates which make up the theoretical fundamental of this research, data collected during the internship at *De Correspondent* was analyzed. By connecting participatory and direct observations with the knowledge-based journalism as discussed in chapter I, the first section explains what legitimizes the knowledge of journalists. The second section demonstrates how *De Correspondent* build up its trustworthiness and its transparency. The third section discusses how articles are formed into an activist voice. Before these sections are disclosed, a selection of employees, who are involved in the production phase, will be briefly introduced by their avatars, names, and job description.

Rob Wijnberg
Founder



Rob is the founder and visionary behind De Correspondent. He gives feedback to writers, writes, and helps with newsletters. His work is to keep everybody on the same page and carry out the vision of the organization.

Rosan Smits
Chief Editor



Rosan is chief editor who carries out the mission of the organization. She pays attention to what articles are published, what tone of voice is used, and makes sure the right people are doing the right job. She protects the organization from flaws.

Jelmer Mommers
Correspondent
Climate and Energy



Jelmer is correspondent climate and energy, and published a book about climate change ("Hoe gaan we dit uitleggen?" published in June 2019). He searches for ways to translate his research findings to his audiences.

Emy Demkes
Correspondent
Clothing



Emy is correspondent clothing. There are a lot of "sustainable fashion bloggers" in the world but Emy critically analyzes the fashion industry, – even if they appear to be sustainable.

Marnix de Bruyne
Copy editor



Marnix is one of the copy editors, they are the final editors to check an article on its accuracy and use of language. Copy editors also form titles, the lead, and shape the tone of voice of the article if necessary.

3.1 WHAT KNOWLEDGE IS WORTH REPRODUCING

It is a sunny Tuesday and the whole office is having lunch outside. While I am finishing my sandwich Heiba, one of the correspondents announces that the writers meeting is starting and whoever wants to join, should come now. To discover more about the way journalists choose their topics and the influence editors have on this. I make my way to chief editor Rosan to ask her if I may join to make participatory observations. One of the correspondents explains that these are open meetings where writers can brainstorm and openly discuss ideas and topics they have for their articles. The meeting concerns discussions about various articles, exploring which approach fits best, and what recent news could be a good starting point for a new article. The correspondents aim at writing “unbreaking news” articles, that do not follow every piece of current news but try to document the context behind the news in longread and investigative journalism.

The discussions during the meeting take place without real hierarchy, and even though the chief editor is present, one of the correspondents takes the lead.. There is a relaxed and personal attitude towards the discussion points. The meeting has more in common with a group of friends that discuss current events. During the discussion, personal opinions are distinguished from facts. The next stage of the writers meeting is the pitching of specific articles.

The pitching process works in a similar way as the discussion, but focuses more on the specifics on how to realize the journalistic piece. Somebody throws an idea in the group and everybody responds with thoughts about whether the news is relevant enough, which correspondent has the most knowledge on the topic, what different perspectives come into play, and which other topics can be connected to this specific topic. While an idea is taking shape, ethical and critical questions are asked about the writing approach. Finally, the writer that has the most relevant experience in relation to the topic takes it on and announces they “will work on it” or “think about it”. The meeting continues in this way, everyone contributes to the pitching process. Every contribution is taken serious and appreciated – even those coming from the intern.

To demonstrate the writers meeting with more details, here follows an example: Chief editor Rosan brings up a recent press release by H&M about exposing their product chain to the audience. She asks the correspondent Clothing Emy if she heard about this as well. She did and

explains that they promise to make their products traceable so that anyone can find out where the clothing really comes from. Certain angles are discussed, perhaps this is a publicity-stunt and *De Correspondent* should wait with writing on this topic until it actually happens. Or perhaps Emy can write something about how this process works, whether H&M does what it says, or what its motives are. The talk results in a list of possible questions Emy could work with. One of the journalists, adds to the conversation: “Transparency is a magic word but does it really reach its goal: does it truly give NGO’s insight into where the industry needs attention?” The conclusion of the brief conversation is that Emy will write a column onto what extent it is useful to make the product chain of big companies transparent. By framing it this way, they bypass the attention for H&M but still give context to the news (Writers Meeting, April 22, 2019). What will be written, is up to the one with the expertise and knowledge: the correspondent Emy herself. However, she allows knowledge and opinions from her colleagues to inspire her. Editors help writers to keep track of the current news cycle and direct writers towards topics that “give context to the news”. The same day Emy publishes a newsletter about sustainability experiments from H&M¹. Followed up by a column about the “energy label” for clothing² and further down the line, she publishes a piece about what is or is not sustainable clothing³.

Resulting from knowledge and expertise about a specific topic, correspondents aim to write articles that are not only describing the news, but are explaining the context and story behind topics that concern a public interest. In the writers meeting, current news was briefly discussed, but the meeting was about the structural story and the context behind it. Knowledge and expertise is necessary in order to be able to give contextual and structural background information. During a Friday afternoon-drink Rob, explains to me what he means with contextual and structural journalism: “We must zoom out”, he says with passion in his eyes. He explains that *De Correspondent* should explain structural problems, “Not daily news, but stories that make us understand the structural issue. If we would describe the news, titles around climate change would say ‘The summer is hot. X says, we must not worry’. But this is just a description of one exclusive event. We try to go beyond the exclusive event and observe a structural problem that explains the red thread through a problem.

¹ Tweedehandskleden zijn populairder dan ooit. Zelfs H&M gaat er nu mee experimenteren

² Een ‘energielabel’ voor kleding? Goed bedoeld, maar een slecht idee

³ Handleiding voor een duurzame kledingkast

It explains why X says we must not worry, and where this statement comes from, and how statements like this have influenced decision-making of politicians. It's the context behind an exclusive event." (Fieldnotes, talking with Rob Wijnberg, August 2, 2019).

This has correspondents face difficult dilemmas at times. When a noteworthy event is taking place, discussions at the editorial office are about what the added value is if they would also write about the events taking place. For example, during the fire of the Notre Dame in Paris, *De Correspondent* decided not to publish anything at all, and during the heatwaves of this summer, heated debates took place whether or not correspondents should involve it in their stories. These discussions often take place on the editorial floor, which, to a certain extent, is open for anyone to join. They consider every good argument valuable and together try to find a fitted final solution. This does not mean that everybody agrees with the final solution. By sitting in on these discussions, it is clear that *De Correspondent* does not move as one body at all times. Their shared values are explained in their manifest. But each correspondent is responsible to argue for their own ideologies. What knowledge is worth spreading, is thus a final decision of the correspondent at hand. But before this final decision, there are many voices that influence it. Chief editor Rosan and founder Rob put effort in making sure there is an added value of each article, that it zooms out, and gives contextual information, while describing a structural issue. The copy editors share their visions about the flow of the story and question certain decisions based on their experience with other journalism. Engagement editors amplify the importance of clarifying why this is an relevant article to read and stress the effort in verbalizing insights of the story as approachable as possible.

In line with Rob's statement, *De Correspondent's* headlines show contextual conclusions about their topics. The titles from Emy's and Jelmer's articles show generalized conclusions: "more popular than ever", "with good intentions, but a bad idea", "guidelines for"⁴, "movement", "gone bankrupt", "explains why we didn't", and "how bad it will become"⁵. The contextual conclusions are legitimized through expertise from its writers. However, Jelmer thinks that being an expert on some areas, does not give him a free-pass to claim reckless statements: "I might be an expert on a parts of climate change, but my expertise

4 Discussed above with Writers Meeting, April 22, 2019

5 See chapter II.III Getting to know De Correspondent

only goes thus far. When a scientist would say: ‘I have researched it all, our only sustainable alternative is nuclear energy’ Then he abuses his position! I might be an expert, but that doesn’t make me neutral. My conclusions are based on my individual knowledge. But I will not abuse my position by telling people what they must do”.

Decisions made were based on (1) how topical or timely a topic was, (2) how to make it a timeless topic or give context to news, and (3) what the added value is to the articles that already exist. Finding inspiration for a writer’s topic seems to be an intuitive process. The journalist has a lot of autonomy and bases their writing on prior knowledge of new research. The editors are consult on the ideas and give feedback throughout the whole writing process, in order to determine that the key insight of a research is verbalized correctly and enough contextual overviews are given. In line with the definition of knowledge-based journalism discussed in chapter I, *De Correspondent* has experts writing on specific topics, who give understanding of phenomena by writing articles in the form of analyzes and explainers. Analysis are articles that overview and review an issue, and explainers are articles that explain a difficult subject. For example, how emissions cause global warming. Due to the platform being journalist- and expert-based, they legitimize themselves to write contextual and structural analyzes.

3.2 ALTERNATIVE OBJECTIVITY

The downside of describing contextual and structural issues can be seen as being opinionated. Founder Rob explains that writing about structural issues, is often confused with having liberal or left-leaning opinions. “Unfortunately, it is like the joke from Stephen Colbert: ‘Reality has a well-known liberal bias’. Simply because we focus on structural problems, we are already seen as ‘lefty’ journalists. It seems as if, when you focus on the individual incident – on ‘the news’, only then you’re considered a well-behaving journalist. News media cover mostly incidents, and then sensationalize them as if the incident is the norm – reality. When we do our job well, research properly, and zoom out so that structures can be analyzed, it is seen as left-wing journalism, and easily targeted as opinionated.” (Fieldnotes, talking with Rob Wijnberg, August 2, 2019). Earlier, correspondent Jelmer pointed out the pitfall of this politically charged label: “The fear of being labelled opinionated, left, or activist is restricting journalists in taking a position about the topic at hand.” (Interview Mommers, August 1, 2019).

In journalism, objectivity has been a construct that is meant to protect journalists from spreading their opinion instead of the facts. But since objectivity has proved itself to be impossible, for this reason *De Correspondent* openly states they cannot be objective (Het Manifest, *De Correspondent* 2019), transparency has become a new norm within journalism. Transparency is a way to legitimize trustworthiness, making knowledge trustworthy. Apart from analyzes and explainers, journalists publish newsletters, columns, and updates through which they take readers into their journalistic search. These are means to explain how arguments are formed and to give insights how a correspondent is finding their sources. The reader is getting involved into the exploration of the journalistic research. In between big article productions, the correspondents publish small articles with the label *update*, in which the reader gets an explanation of what recent progress or obstacles took place. Often correspondents ask for information from their readers. They do this because *De Correspondent* believes that 1000 readers know more than one correspondent, and it is often valuable to make use of readers' knowledge. The journalists writing for *De Correspondent* share their learning-curve with their readers by talking with and asking feedback from members. This gives members insight in the questions, considerations, dilemmas, and assumptions that are part of the journalistic choices. Furthermore, it gives members an opportunity to support the work of *De Correspondent* with their knowledge and expertise (Fieldnotes, August 2, 2019).

Desire for balance

Another traditional journalistic norm is balanced reporting, which is generally considered to contribute to objective reporting that presents "both sides in any significant dispute with roughly equal attention" (Entman 1989, 30). Even though *De Correspondent* does not claim to be objective, it is often still expected to publish balance reporting. Copy editor Marnix explains the issue of this expectation with climate journalism: "When there is equal evidence for climate change, as there is against it, it would make sense to have balanced reporting. But often a balance in climate reporting is simply not an accurate representation of reality! When one scientist doubts the catastrophic effects of climate change, while 99 are sure about the urgency, then how would it ever be accurate to have 'balanced' reporting about climate change" (Fieldnotes, August 2, 2019). The idea of balanced reporting in climate journalism frustrates correspondent Jelmer even more: "Apparently, it is con-

sidered rational to remain calm. They say ‘those climate people are so emotional, they worry too much. We, the rational people counterbalance them. Because we know how to keep our head cool, we know what is really the truth’. This superior approach probably brings them very far. Recently, they even use the term ‘*The Guardian* line’, to refer to a platform that talks too much about climate crisis. These ‘newscritics’ behave as if there is no crisis. All for the sake of balance? People continue to find it utterly important that when the world is coming to a global crisis, the moment action is inevitable, then we are suppose to have somebody who says ‘guys, everything is going to be just fine! Don’t worry about anything.’ Why? For the sake of counterbalancing the voices of crisis –great.” (Interview Mommers, August 1, 2019). At *De Correspondent*, journalists try to analyze several sides of stories. For climate journalism, however, it is “not a good representation” and “not considered a valid contribution” (Fieldnotes, August 2, 2019; Interview Mommers, August 1, 2019). “What I don’t want is to show two sides of the climate story. Climate science has already done that over thirty years. It is concluded that it is a fact and we should focus us now at what it implies. The longer I work on a topic, the more I claim a position. If you continue on the path of how journalism used to be practiced, you become cynical.” (Interview Mommers, June 14, 2019). Jelmer’s position and Marnix’ statements are in line with how founder Rob explains *De Correspondent* on the online platform *Medium*:

Just as our Climate Change correspondent not only reports on the effects of global warming because they’re facts, but because he openly considers it the biggest problem we face today – and therefore actively advocates ways to battle it too.

To be open about these moral stances, every correspondent writes a mission statement, both short and long, that clearly outlines what she intends to do and hopes to achieve as a journalist for the platform. And no one has a mission statement that says “report the news”, because news is not itself a mission – it’s a mode of information.

Instead, correspondents’ mission statements are the starting point of their storytelling, giving readers a sense of purpose and direction. They show why a correspondent thinks her beat is important and what she hopes to investigate and share with readers.

(Wijnberg 2018)

De Correspondent and Jelmer do not stand alone in this rejection of balanced reporting. The frustration of Marnix and Jelmer about “balanced” climate reporting, and the way Rob explains their beliefs about journalism are backed up by the research from Boykoff (2007). Boykoff found that balanced reporting on scientific investigations of human-induced climate change is no longer evident in quality newspapers in the United Kingdom. He suggests that we are still “flogging a dead norm” (2007). Jelmer’s story about an interviewee on the Dutch radio program *NH Radio* confirms that, even though journalism is no longer trying to reflect “balanced” reporting on climate change, the audience still expects balanced reporting: “I was interviewed by NH radio. Every question was framed in a way as if he was the devil’s advocate. Now, you could argue that this is so great and objective of him. People think it should be stimulated that when someone comes into a studio, someone who spreads awareness about the state of our world, the host should ask things like “how do you know that so sure”. Ha! How I know that?! Look at the science. It’s almost seen as a traditional ethic that we must – at all times – ask a critical questions in order to maintain balance. When a politically right-winged person comes to the radio’s studio, the host asks things that a climate activist would ask. But when a left-winged person comes, climate sceptical questions are asked. This way you can see if somebody is able to answer the questions correctly, or something. The hosts are provocative and quoting nonsense that they heard at some point in his life. I’m often enough presented as if I am coming to explain: “my opinion”. They will quote scientific facts to me and say, ‘According to Jelmer Mommers the largest portion of global warming is due to humanity’. What do you mean “*according to Jelmer Mommers?!*” It is not my opinion, it is based on countless research from the past decennia. Apparently, they feel the pressure that they need to be sceptic. This is weird, it is lazy, that we are questioning a fact, and it is in a way activism – but then for the status quo.” (Interview Mommers, August 1, 2019).

Jelmer is almost angry about this confusion of balanced reporting and objectivity, Rob laughs about it, and Marnix talks about it as if it is something absurd. These emotions explain why the journalists⁶ that were interviewed prior to *De Correspondent* interviews, responded apprehensive when asked why they were not giving voice to climate skeptics.

Rob's idea about the association of contextual and structural stories with politically left opinions, explains why climate change can be such a polarizing topic: it is a structural problem of which you must understand the context behind it, in order to grasp the crisis of it. Objectivity and balanced reporting are described as outdated characteristics of journalism, specifically journalism about climate change. This seems very clear to everybody I know from *De Correspondent*, but I do not get the feeling this is always as clear for people outside *De Correspondent* or non-members. Since most articles about climate change are written from the perspective that climate change is real, dangerous, and we must do something, the coverage seems far from objective and balance. This dissonance explains why a lot of climate change journalism can be confused with activism. Which, in its turn, explains why a writer can give the impression of being activistic, without trying deliberately to activate its readers. Seeing the frustration of *De Correspondent* employees – the founder, editors, and correspondents – shows how often they are still confronted with an audience that expect them to conduct balanced and objective journalism. Thus, they share the positions that they take and explain on what it is based and why. By doing this, *De Correspondent* is transparent towards its readership, which might be confused with activism, if one does not make use of its transparency.

3.3 PRODUCTION OF ACTIVISM

In the first interview conducted with Jelmer, he clearly verbalizes the *interaction* of climate journalism and activism from his perspective: "Journalism, in the way we practice it, is more activistic than journalism as you might know it. But activism is not the priority. Pieces flow out of content, research, and knowledge. The activism follows out of the content. It is a position that we take, not a conviction we have prior to writing the pieces". Jelmer is thinking about and considering his position on journalistic activism out loud during the interviews. "I am considering diving into food journalism. My questions would concern how our food is made and built up. This would probably lead me to the conclusion that a lot of food production is bad for the environment. For me this conclusion would result in that my Christmas dinners most likely become more sober. It became my personal conviction. So, based on the results of my research, I am allowed to express my position, which would be: the dinner tables must become more sober. Now, this becomes activistic when you write a public piece about it. But I think that is justified." (Interview Mommers,

June 14, 2019). Jelmer understands activism to be justified when it results from research that aims to answer an open research question.

In the final interview with Jelmer, he *differentiates* climate journalism from activism: “Activism has the risk of losing curiosity. You’re not researching the topic anymore, but you are finding ways how to influence the situation. If that’s activism, then it differs a lot from journalism. Journalism should always ask a question or research something. A journalist cannot take a definite position, he must remain curious. Journalism serves the public’s need of researching topics, sharing information, uncovering structures, and explaining things. I might serve the same public interest as activists: the need of doing something. But we serve the public interest in very different ways. Yes – we both call for action. But the difference is what your goals are: unraveling something or influencing somebody?” (Interview Mommers, August 1, 2019).

Jelmer is not a big fan of the activist-label: “We would be doing much better work if we did not get marked as activists. The fear of being called an activist is limiting journalists, because we are ‘not supposed to be involved’ with our journalism.” (Interview Mommers, August 1, 2019) According to Jelmer the fear the activist label is merely causing counter-reactions of a different form of activism. “Maarten Ceulemans, a science journalist from *De Volkskrant*, writes a piece about the speed of melting ice. But then in the lead or in the headline he states, ‘But this is not a reason to start worrying’. That is just as well activating. Namely, ‘you can still have faith in my calm conclusion’. He has been doing this forever, and takes the position of telling everybody not to panic. His position is basically that all people that panic, have no clue how often the world has been promised a doomsday already. That’s also activist. We are questioning a fact, and it is in a way activism – but then for the status quo.” (Interview Mommers, August 1, 2019)

The differentiation, the overlap, and the negative association of activist journalism, make it a rather complicated construct. Activism might be a too big of a label, but behavioral change could be a positive result of journalism, without being seen as an activist. “Sure, I want to show people what they can do, what is useful for them to take on. But it is not my responsibility as a journalist to move people’s behavior. However, people want to know. They ask for advice on how to change their behavior. I have read books about behavioral change, but it comes down to that whatever you write about climate change: it causes nega-

tive attitudes. Alarmistic messages puts people off. Articles about flying less, or not at all, puts people off. Well, I am going to do it all. And I don't have another lifetime to do it in. There is so much more to cover. I will not wait and pounder on every possible strategy." (Interview Mommers, June 14, 2019). Jelmer's findings might result in an activating article, but Jelmer's goal is to first have a question about something that yet needs be unraveled. When his findings imply a possible act, that can be explained based on his prior research, and make sense, then Jelmer is raising his voice. His first priority is to unravel something. Sometimes this results in making an attempt to bring his readers to a certain action. In the line of priorities, first comes gathering knowledge and explaining an issue. Then activism may or may not become part of his work after that. But activism is not allowed to become the priority.

While Jelmer seems to be searching for his position on climate journalism and activism, it becomes clear that he is open about his ideology, like most writers of *De Correspondent*. And It can be argued that, with or without their awareness, this is the weapon that enables them to cause a movement amongst their readers, and perhaps beyond. Lull (1995) states that the strength of ideology depends on its communication. Carvalho (2007) views ideology and media discourse as mutually constitutive. Texts result from ideological standpoints, while at the other hand texts produce ideology: "News and other media genres always reproduce and/or challenge a certain ideology" (2007, 225). Journalism does not have to be seen as mere conveyors of someone else's ideologies. Allowing or denying social actors to advance their ideological standings is not their only job any longer (Lull 1995). Furthermore, journalism can have agency in bringing in new ideological readings of issues or confronting those of the status quo.

Jelmer published his book on climate change, *Hoe gaan we dit uitleggen*⁷, in June, 2019. He participated at several events to talk about the book and his story. The first was *Klimaatnacht*⁸ in Amsterdam, organized by Milieudefensie⁹ (Fieldnotes *Klimaatnacht*, Pakhuis de Zwijger, June 7, 2019). This organization tries to "wake up" The Netherlands for the current state of the climate. Green is their theme color. Not a natural kind of green, but rather a political, almost neon kind of green. A host welcomes us to the event in the theater. "Climate change is the problem of our time.

7

Loosely translated to English: *How will we explain this*

8

Loosely translated to English: *Climate -night*

9

Milieudefensie is a non-for-profit that campaigns for a better state of the climate

Never before have there been so many people advocating for a better economy. Circular and sustainable. There is a lot of fake news on this topic going around. Climate deniers who are confusing our country. It is time that The Netherlands wakes up and takes action!”.

During the *Klimaatnacht* event, an event which is similar to a political gathering due to the topic and audience attending, the organization tries to spice things up through jokes and activities, instead of spending this time to share substantial knowledge. Instead of receiving in-depth explanations about climate change, the audience is challenged to take a quiz on their smartphones. This is a weird experience and feels unnecessary. Afterwards, “climate-heroes” are invited to the stage: farmer David, who pleads for sustainable entrepreneuring of chickens and the teenager Lisa, who argues for a better future. She “woke up due to the illness of her mother caused by the environment” and sounds like a hyped up and badly imitated version of Greta Thunberg¹⁰. It’s great how the event manages to gather everyday citizens and get them involved with a global concern. However, the event is so hyped up that my guest and I leave before it ends. We feel like intruders.

But before this, Jelmer takes the stage for about 15 minutes and the atmosphere changes immediately. It is in control, serious, and the content is substantial. He explains how he was so surprised by his research on climate change. He reads out two passages from his book, *Hoe gaan we dit uitleggen*, which describe our world in 2050. A synthesizer plays with deep warm tones and the lights are dimmed. Jelmer sketches a disastrous world where the end of time is coming close with a rapid speed. When he finishes, the lights are turned on again and the synthesizer stops. “That’s pretty depressing, don’t you think. I am simply pulling through our current situation and this is a very realistic image of where we will be in 35 years. However, it is not the only scenario that is possible.”

He starts reading another passage. This time the lights are not dimmed and the synthesizer plays higher, more lively tones. He talks about “the great turn”, which happened around the world in 2020. A time in which governments and companies decided that the plundering of Earth’s resources had to stop and this decision was followed by great innovations. However, this turn in our global choices did not evade all bad effects.

¹⁰ Greta Thunberg is a young Swedish climate change activist, who received various prizes and awards for her activism. Some media have described her impact on the world stage as the “Greta Thunberg effect”.

There are definitely resources that cannot be used anymore.

During the evening Jelmer explained his ideology and was transparent about his research on climate change. His stories were told with true emotion and he made sure the setting amplified his words. But he also showed nuance, mentioning multiple times that a lot is still possible. He was talking about personal friends who thought differently, and how he understood that. Jelmer seems activistic, but far from the activism of *Klimaatnacht*. He shows how he took a position after doing a lot of research, and that there are two choices to be made that have two very different outcomes, as mentioned before. This event embodies the overlap and the differentiation between climate journalism and activism. They are associated with each other, but the starting point differs, as do the arguments that are used (Fieldnotes *Klimaatnacht*, Pakhuis de Zwijger, June 7, 2019).

This chapter explored how knowledge was used, journalistic norms were expressed and activism was or was not conducted within the production of climate journalism. Based on these fieldnotes and interviews it is found that through the production process a lot of actors are involved. *De Correspondent* desires to publish contextual background articles that zoom out of the everyday news. By doing so they legitimize themselves as analysers of societal problems. The content is based on prior knowledge, but is more than merely knowledge. It is a contextual conclusion about a situation, based on subjective observations. The correspondents acknowledge their subjectivity, but simultaneously also clearly take their position. Conclusions are often putten in the titles, which could explain why *De Correspondent* is sometimes perceived as a group of people who thinks they have figured it all out.

Climate journalism can easily be perceived activism because the coverage seems opinionated and out of balance. However, it is explained why objective and balance are perceived as outdated norms and as limiting expectations to climate journalism. It labels climate journalists as emotional, not to be taken too serious. How the difference and overlap between climate journalism and activism is experienced, is explained through its production. Jelmer does not claim not to be emotional about climate change. However, he expresses his disapproval of the conclusion that being emotional about climate change is not ok, and he claims his freedom in taking a position about what must be done against climate change.

DISSEMINATION OF THE MESSAGE

IV

The following chapter analyzes in what ways climate activism is interwoven with the dissemination of journalistic articles about climate change. Using the three debates that determine the theoretical foundation of this research, data collected during the internship at *De Correspondent* was analyzed. By connecting participatory and direct observations with the knowledge-based journalism, as discussed in chapter I, the first section of this chapter explains how the engagement team of *De Correspondent* profiles knowledge and how they make it attractive to their readers. The second section explains how the essence of trust and sincerity is embodied through the dissemination of articles and interaction with readers. Finally, the last section discusses how the articles are used to encourage a movement of activism. Before continuing with the sections, the team that is involved in the dissemination phase will be briefly introduced.

Daphne van der Kroft
Membership
Director



Daphne guides the team which tries to understand the need of members, help them, reach new supporters, and expand its impact. Daphne is team leader of the engagement team, the member support team, and the membership analysis team.

Mayke Blok
Growth &
Engagement
Editor



Mayke conducts data research with the limited data *De Correspondent* collects from its members. She connects these findings with editorial thinking, trying to make sense of the balance between intuition and results.

Lena Bril
Engagement
Editor



Lena searches for insights and protects the balance between the needs of the readers, online attractiveness, and the manifesto of *De Correspondent*. She wants to activate people without taking away from the quality of content.

Malouk van der Velden
Engagement
Editor & Internship
Supervisor



Malouk's speciality is to take the position of the reader and make sure anyone can read a text. By explaining insights of the articles, she makes complicated content attractive to readers without any or with a limited background knowledge.

From the start of the internship with *De Correspondent*, it became clear that a vital part is often left out of the equation from research about journalism: the editors that shares insights and spread the articles (Fieldnotes, April 22, 2019). At *De Correspondent*, these editors are called engagement editors, I integrated in their team as an intern while conduct research. My team, team engagement, is concerned with newsletters, contact with members and social media. The mission of the engagement team is to involve as many people as possible into the journalism of *De Correspondent*. This team represents ‘the voice’ of the platform and mediates between correspondents and audiences. Paying members of *De Correspondent* receive their texts every morning via a personal newsletter, while social media followers read headlines on social media.

I will be made responsible for the daily newsletter from *De Correspondent*. This is the tool the platform uses to share articles with their readers (Fieldnotes, April 16, 2019). From the beginning, the team give the impression of being eager to learn more about their readers and an openness to critique. Team Engagement is not responsible for writing articles, nor directional decisions, but they do decide on a daily base how online users and members first encounter articles. They choose which insights of an article are highlighted, and thus what users get to see on social media platforms or in newsletters. They give a voice to the articles beyond the website, on social media, in newsletters, and via interaction with readers. Team Engagement has personal contact with everybody at *De Correspondent*. Journalists want their articles to be put in the spotlight; editors check the team’s texts and visa versa; visual editors add to newsletters and social media posts with their collection of images; and team Engagement reaches out directly to the readers to receive feedback. This team and the platform both have open attitudes towards critique from their readers. They want to involve members into their journalism and stimulate progress in the world. If anyone has a direct influence on the online discourse of an article, it is the engagement editor that writes social media posts or newsletters. They are responsible for stimulating readers to share *De Correspondent*’s message and thus spread the news (Participatory observations, April 23, 2019).

4.1 SPREADING KNOWLEDGE

“The Internet has changed journalism. It gave articles an online life. The connection between a reader and a journalist was distant before the internet. There was no interaction. Now, with the internet, journalists are all of a sudden able to see how people respond to their articles, that they agree or disagree, and if they claim to do something with what they have just read. Now we realize we have an audience, we can almost see them, we know how many they are, and we realize that you have a certain amount of power to do something with the reach you have.” (Interview Blok, *De Correspondent*, August 2, 2019).

This is how Mayke describes the strength of online journalism. Indirectly, she also describes the task of her team. The Internet made interaction with audiences possible, but due to the Internet, discourses of articles also became hard to control. Engagement editors influence the desired way their articles enters the online world. They spread the information, stories, and reflections of journalists online.

The process of social media

In attempting to engage people with climate change issues, engagement teams should consider two issues: (1) how to encourage rational public engagement with the climate change and (2) how to make the issue appealing, interesting and meaningful to the individual.

Research on communication suggests that climate change communication should aim to achieve meaningful engagement in all three facets: understanding, emotion, and behaviour (Nerlich, Koteyko, and Brown 2010). Existing communication approaches often failed to cause meaningful engagement of audiences, since it does not consider the implicit values, attitudes and emotions of readers (Ockwell, Whitmarsh, and O'Neill 2009). Communications approaches often rely on the outdated psychological models that assume that readers are ‘empty vessels’ waiting to be filled with useful information, on which they will act rationally. Decision making is often not rational, but influenced by underlying heuristics and emotions. It is important to base an approach on a better understanding of how people are engaged on an emotional level (Ockwell, Whitmarsh, and O'Neill 2009).

To illustrate how team Engagement handles understanding, emotion, and behavior in spreading articles online, , let's take a look at the campaign around *Hoe gaan we dit uitleggen*, Jelmer's book. His book, like any other book

published by *De Correspondent*, is simultaneously presented in the form of articles on the website of *De Correspondent*. Next to the original book, chapters are simultaneously edited in the format of an article. The book is for sale in most places where books are sold in The Netherlands and every week an article of the book gets published on *De Correspondent*. A section in the book discusses the horrific results from global warming, when this part was selected to be published on the platform, the engagement team saw this as a difficult challenge. “Seven radical consequences of an increasingly warmer earth” does not paint a pretty picture (Mommers 2019). Team Engagement had to promote the article on social media and in newsletters, while being aware that a negative and alarmistic message is not “cool” or attractive to most audiences. Especially Malouk is worried about the perspective of the reader. “This is depressing to read! I feel bummed out already. How are we going to sell this on our socials?”. Malouk explains that in this case they need to tease online users with the text so that they get curious to click on the article. When reading the full article, one can gain an understanding of the context behind each claim. If one of the shocking findings from the article would be used in the online post, it would be too sensationalizing and online users could judge *De Correspondent* as emotional exaggerators (Participant observations: disastrous article, May 27, 2019). What stands out in this process is that the engagement editors might agree with most of the content from the articles, but they force themselves each time to think from the perspective of the online user – whom might find this content controversial. Mayke explains that “sometimes a correspondent writes an article from one perspective. Then the text is not attractive to people who don’t agree with the starting point. On the other hand, when a piece already has a lot of nuance on itself, I try to spice it up a bit with some activating words. This helps a bit in triggering people to read the article – when they read it they will still find the nuance. So I spice up the positive articles with a bit of urgency, while the negative and analyzing articles are presented in a more positive post. In other words, heavy pieces are made approachable and positive pieces a bit more firmly” (Interview Kroft and Blok, *De Correspondent*, August 2, 2019).

Furthermore, online users have different characteristics depending which platform they are on. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, or the discussion platform underneath an article of *De Correspondent*. Each online environment has different attributes and characteristics. Instagram is great for positive interaction with users,

while Twitter is a place where other journalists and public figures are quick to judge if a post is too activating. The platforms thus influence in what way knowledge is represented. “A recent piece about the job market was perfect for LinkedIn but a column is not always great for Facebook, due to its opinion” (Interview Kroft and Blok, *De Correspondent*, August 2, 2019). This is exactly why Malouk said: “How are we going to sell this on our socials?”. A proper way has to be found to still make this confronting knowledge attractive to the audience and suitable to the critical atmosphere of Facebook and Twitter (Participant observations: disastrous article, May 27, 2019).

It is useful to look at the psychology behind marketing strategies since there is a certain overlap of how to make information attractive. Interpersonal communication of sharing and sending online articles can be described as a form of *word of mouth*, or as informal communications, which is directed at other consumers about the usage of particular goods and services (Westbrook 1987, 261). Word of mouth has a huge impact on behavior and shapes everything; from the movies people watch to the websites they visit, and the articles they read (Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009). Berger and Milkman (2011) analyzed 6956 *New York Times* articles in order to examine which articles are shared most by readers. They found that positivity and emotionality increased sharing very effectively. Informative, interesting, and surprising content also increases sharing. What decreased social sharing were non-arousing emotions, like sadness. These findings back-up the difficulty team Engagement experiences when writing a post for a sad and “depressing” article. Through their own expertise and experience, the team puts into practice Berger and Milkman’s research, by reframing articles for social media posts.

After the team reads the article based on the book’s chapter about the horrific results from global warming and some possible options for texts are discussed, the following Facebook piece was posted: “In every conversation about climate change is somebody who says: *Global warming is not as bad as it seems*. The issue is that, if we ignore the continuous warmer earth, it will at some point start following its own rules, not ours. This happens when you give a push to nature, and another one, and another one...”¹¹. Even though the text can be seen as disastrous, it does not contain details about what actually would happen.

¹¹ In ieder gesprek over klimaatverandering is er wel iemand die zegt: die opwarming valt wel mee. Alleen dan negeren we dat een warmere aarde op een gegeven moment haar eigen regels volgt, niet die van ons. Dit gebeurt er als je de natuur een zetje geeft, en nog een zetje, en nog een zetje...

It tries to make the online user interested, and leaves further interpretation to the article. In order to counterbalance this heavy message, I am asked to place a first comment under the article on Facebook, saying: “Yes, the true story is that we are deeply stuck in shit. But the true story is *also* that we have a say about how bad it will become. Together we could fight global warming. How? You can read it in the new book from climate-correspondent Jelmer Mommers: [link to the book]”¹² Through this comment online users are motivated to (1) buy the book, and (2) read more about the topic of which their interest has just been caught (Participant observations: disastrous article, May 27, 2019).

Under public attention

As Malouk explained in the beginning of this chapter: “On Facebook you can persuade people with a second layer of a post. You comment with another article that gives them more of what they have just responded on. Now you have their attention, you want them to stay a little longer with you.” (Fieldnotes, April 17, 2019). By doing so, team engagement puts the topics that *De Correspondent* considers relevant under public attention. “Before I joined *De Correspondent*, I worked at *Het Parool*, here I was writing reports about random news, from the weather to a blunder of some public figure. Everyday kind of stuff. Not important, but just fun stuff that would trigger people to click. Then I started at *De Correspondent*, and there were those heavy and massive complex topics that nobody was talking about. Privacy, climate change, etcetera. Nobody was interested in climate change and nobody was writing about it. Nobody! Climate change – nobody. Privacy – nobody. Migration – nobody. But then some diehard fans started following the correspondents that wrote on these topics; and then the waves of refugees came, then Google and Facebook turned out to break into our privacy, and when heatwaves and climate discussions became noticeable: we were ready. For a while, we already had been telling people to think about these topics. And as soon as it became national news, we already had the context behind these issues covered.” (Interview Kroft and Blok, *De Correspondent*, August 2, 2019). Mayke is proud of the topics *De Correspondent* has been able to put under public attention, even before they were seen in the national news cycle.

¹² Ja, het eerlijke verhaal is dat we diep in de shit zitten. Maar het eerlijke verhaal is óók dat wij bepalen hoe erg het wordt. Samen kunnen we de opwarming van de aarde tegengaan. Hoe? Je leest het in het nieuwe boek van Klimaatcorrespondent Jelmer Mommers

Thus far, it is discussed that the Internet makes interaction with readers more visible, which is why team Engagement is concerned with online interaction of articles and other forms of digital content. A practice example is used to explain how team Engagement makes sense of disseminating knowledge-based articles with an activating tone. The team thinks from the perspective of the reader or online user. They try to balance a message by (1) simplifying complex content, (2) making alarming messages more approachable, (3) or by spicing up positive articles with firm statements. With the example in the previous section, an approach is chosen that brings climate change under public attention. The goal of team Engagement is to bring topics from *De Correspondent* under attention with its audience. Mayke states that this is what makes her proud of *De Correspondent*, after which she adds an important point, which will be further discussed in the next sections of this chapter: “When you find what you should talk about, before everybody is talking about it, you have very interesting journalism – which is somewhat also activist” (Interview Kroft and Blok, *De Correspondent*, August 2, 2019). Finding what everybody should talk about, is based on a subjective conviction. Since the engagement team considers some items important, it makes sense that give an activist impression.

4.2 THE EMOTIONS OF TRANSPARENCY

In the first chapter of this research transparency is proposed as a means to explain readers how stories are collected, reported, and how the organization operates (Aspen Institute 2005). At *De Correspondent*, transparency, amongst other things, is displayed by correspondents through giving readers information on possible unintended effects of their ever-present biases. They do this by disclosing how their personal experiences, attitudes, and beliefs have influenced their work (in line with Weinberger 2009), and by sharing the process of gathering and constructing stories together with their journalistic decisions (in line with Moore 2009).

Take readers into the process

During the internship, the English expansion¹³ of *De Correspondent* was criticized for not doing what the audiences anticipated it to do (Owen 2019), this resulted in a lot of negativity on Twitter. The Monday after the article is pub-

13 In September 2019 *The Correspondent* will be launched, this is an international and English expansion of *De Correspondent*. In 2018 the crowdfunding took place and during the internship the integration of English and Dutch editors took place in the run up towards the launch of *The Correspondent*.

lished, the whole staff is called in for an editorial meeting. During the meeting, the leadership team explains their thoughts on how this negativity have happened. A discussion follows about how mistakes like these can be avoided in the future. Somebody suggests: “Is there not a way to be more transparent about our decisions? Document our process through an online diary or blog? We have done this in the past with the Dutch start of *De Correspondent*.” Malouk fills me in on what happened with that online diary: “Nobody was reading it. It took us forever to write it, but only few were interested to follow every step of our process. It was overkill” (Fieldnotes, editorial meeting, April 29, 2019).

This vignette shows that transparency is of high value on every level of the organization and they often used it as an approach to show online users that *De Correspondent* is trustworthy. However, as Malouk points out, transparency is easier said than done. Transparency also has to be communicated. Mayke explains: “We try not to represent ourselves as a brand, but as individual correspondents with their own mission. We want to sound on social media and in newsletters as if we communicate on a personal level.” (Fieldnotes, first impressions, April 19, 2019). Whenever I write a text for a social, the team reminds me to involve the title and the full name of the writer: “Correspondent Jelmer Mommers says/found/explored/wrote” (Fieldnotes, April 23, 2019). After a conversation with one of the paying members of *De Correspondent*, Malouk tells the team how personally involved members have become with the correspondents: “This person was considering to cancel her membership because Jelmer hasn’t been writing so much anymore. She asked about Jelmer and why he was not writing as much as he used to, and when he would start again. Luckily, he is publishing his book soon!” (Fieldnotes, April 19, 2019). It is one of the effects the personal voice of *De Correspondent* has. The members do not just trust the brand of *De Correspondent*, they often trust a specific correspondent as their source of information.

Another transparency approach through which *De Correspondent* attempts to gain trust, is by admitting their mistakes and revising it. During my internship, I am responsible for writing summaries of the conversations that take place under the various articles on the website of *De Correspondent*. These summaries contain valuable contributions members make to the content. By placing insights from conversations between members and correspondents in daily newsletters, we exaggerate the value of members contributions. However, sometimes the summary misrepre-

sents an extensive argument of a member. Members often send e-mails when they feel something is not represented in the correct way. To acknowledge our mistake and act open, sincere, and transparent, I was asked to write a small “PS” in the newsletter of the next day (Fieldnotes, exploded online conversation, July 17, 2019). A similar acknowledgement of a mistake was sent out several times throughout my internship. Whenever team Engagement was aware of a misrepresentation, they often made haste to set it right with their readers.

At *De Correspondent*, it is considered a useful and valuable tool to be transparent. Team Engagement makes sure this transparency is consistent throughout the dissemination of articles by presenting individual voices who share what is found or written, and by sharing mistakes and learning curves. This personal tone of voice also legitimizes the communication of a correspondent's position. In the next section, it is explained how this free range of communicating positions, can cause a backlash of trust from its readers.

Nuance of statements

There is friction about the job team Engagement executes at *De Correspondent*. On the one hand, they are responsible for spreading articles and making them attractive for fast online consumption; while on the other hand, they protect the nuance of the article, while it is making its entrance in the online world. Articles of 8000 words need to be promoted via a tweet of 140 characters. The team does this together, by sending various versions of the texts back and forth. For example, Malouk asked me to read an article and write an online post, afterwards she or Mayke gave me feedback, revisions are made and go for a final check. When shocking findings of an article were used in the tweet, statements that could trigger people to read the article, the tweet became too sensationalized. When pointing out the nuance of an article, it was too boring.

Lena explains how she has developed her writing style through this process: “We are not led by numbers or click rates, but we must be aware of them. We write with a personal tone so that receivers of newsletters or online posts cause a trigger to read an article. Correspondents are busy with how they write themselves, while we think about how an article can be interesting and how a correspondent can become a trusted source for a random reader. People without prior knowledge, who will not automatically understand why the writing topic of an article is relevant, must also want to read the article.” (Fieldnotes, April 16, 2019).

The personal tone of voice that is used by team Engagement as a tool to trigger readers, gives freedom to express an opinionated stand from a correspondent. It gives team Engagement the freedom to write a bit more activating, and often it works as a magnet for online attention. However, it also has the potential to not accomplish these goals. Social media posts can become emotional, filled with opinions or bold statements. These can fuel extreme opinions, and thus lead to polarization. Daphne points out this friction during an interview with Mayke: “It is great that we put urgent topics under public attention, but we must remain open to other opinions. This is exactly what should set us apart from activism. And for the better, when someone communicates their position too strong, it also becomes easier to feel alienated from the communicator. When I communicate with an very activististic correspondent, who does not seem open to other positions, then I also start to doubt their trustworthiness – let alone our readers. Before I worked for *De Correspondent*, the headlines of articles drove me mad. It felt like this lefty, fluffy, hippie club at *De Correspondent* got lost in its own thinking patterns. But now, I realize how open for discussion everybody is, and how nothing is actually set in stone.” (Interview Kroft and Blok, *De Correspondent*, August 2, 2019).

To add to this, it was noticeable during the internship that topics which *De Correspondent* sees as urgent, are not always perceived as urgent to others. These topics are in many cases polarizing discussions, meaning, there are strong opposite opinions that estrange people from each other further and further. Daphne finds this unfortunate, and “would love for *De Correspondent* to take a stronger position in depolarization. I would be even more proud if *De Correspondent* takes a relevant role in depolarization”. Mayke looks back at the beginning of *De Correspondent* to compare it to its current position: “We never conducted less activism than we do right now, but we have less diverse opinions within the organization. Meaning, correspondents don’t have to defend their own standpoint so often anymore within the *De Correspondent*. This, in combination with the fact that we focus on polarizing topics such as climate change, vaccination, and the EU, makes us more vulnerable to the negative label of activism.” (Interview Kroft and Blok, *De Correspondent*, August 2, 2019).

It is one of my tasks to write tweets. It is challenging to find a balance with writing between a fun text that triggers readers to click, while being aware of possible polarizing effects, and still making sure the findings or insights from the article are accurately translated. One key

tool that makes it possible to find nuance without losing the attractiveness of a text, is that team Engagement is not led by clickbaits. Throughout the internship with *De Correspondent*, the team never formed a social media post based on the motivation of getting as many online users as possible to click on the article. In daily practices, click rates are not involved in discussions or approaches of writing social media posts. The team is aware which article “did it better” than the other, or if a social media post gets a lot attention. However, click rates of an article are not mentioned throughout the processes of choosing what to involve in the content. Eventually, social media posts often result in a guideline, a contradistinction, a statement from a correspondent or a question that is supposed to get answered within the article.

The dissemination of articles is a constant process of making moral and practical decision about what is right or wrong to put in a text. Team Engagement is exposed to all the online responses and is aware of what effect they can have. Two standards that are high on their list when writing a text are: they must always remain open to other opinions and that they cannot use clickbaits as starting point for a post. To find the perfect balance between the need of the audience and the identity of *De Correspondent*, team Engagement discusses these considerations on a daily basis with chief and copy editors, and correspondents. This interaction to find a right approach and tone of voice determined the rate of activism that was allowed throughout the campaign of Jelmer’s book. How this interaction determines the rate of activism around the campaign, is discussed in the next section.

4.3 HOW TO MOVE READERS AND GROW ACTIVISTS

Team Engagement tries to fill the gap between the production of *De Correspondent* and its readers. Chief and copy editors protect the quality of the articles, which explains why both teams often consider different things to be important. On a daily basis, discussions amongst the chief editor, engagement editors, and copy editors take place on what they should or should not include in their journalism. On the one hand, there seems to be a desire from the readers to have more constructive journalism and fun stories. On the other hand, it is considered below-standard when they focus on less interesting and intellect topics.

During the first week of the internship, a discussion took place about the campaign surrounding the upcoming book of Jelmer, which was published in June 2019. Daphne explained that they had decided whether or not the cli-

mate campaign that Lena had prepared was still going to happen. While she was still updating the team about every consideration, Lena interrupted her: “Please can you skip the intro, you’re making me nervous! Tell us what the final decision is”. It turned out that the campaign Lena had built, was not happening due to a discussion about to what extent *De Correspondent* should give space for activist journalism. Everyone has a different opinion about this: from Jelmer, as a passionate climate journalist; to chief editor Rosan, who thinks that one should be a lot more careful in persuading readers. The campaign intended to get people to sign up for a manifesto, stating they acknowledge climate change and declaring their responsibility to take better care of the environment (Fieldnotes, climate campaign, April 18, 2019).

Some months later, near the end of the internship, I ask Lena how she looks back at that decision. “Well, on hindsight, I agree we should not have started such an activating campaign. At first, I thought this would create the perfect momentum: the climate is getting hotter, the topic is *hot*, people desire a coherent story and contextual background information, Jelmer is writing a book, it should be promoted. This was *the* moment to put Dutch people on the same page and nudge everybody towards action for the climate. But, there were good reasons why the initial plan was changed, and after *a lot* of discussions about it, it made sense to call it off. The campaign was not supported by everybody from the editorial office, there was not enough knowledge about what was the most effective approach, we weren’t prepared for bad outcomes, and most of all: we were not sure about the needs of the audience. The need could be a political movement, scientific explanations, guidelines to a environmental friendly life, or a nudge in acknowledging the urgency of climate change. The need was unclear and it would’ve been a lukewarm, all-over-the-place campaign. That’s not what *De Correspondent* wants to embody. And this is exactly why, looking back, I agree with the decision (Fieldnotes, August 2, 2019).

Whenever there is a big decision to be made that concerns writing and online interaction with possible readers, team Engagement joins the discussions to give their thoughts on it. Research proposes that journalism must engage with people’s important values and sources of identity, instead of focusing on short term interests, in order to achieve meaningful engagement and change behavior through activist messaging (Nerlich, Koteyko, and Brown 2010). This supports the behavior of *De Correspondent*, when they first tried to figure out what the important needs

and values of their readers are, instead of focusing on short term interests.

Looking back at how the campaign worked out, Jelmer explains that the team was very thoughtful about what would have positive effects and what would be too much. “But to be honest. This is not an exact science. We act upon trial and error. We do think our actions through, but we are never sure if it is the right approach. We don’t really know what works with behavioral change.” (Interview Jelmer, June 14, 2019). He further explains how the environmental friendly guidelines he gives in some articles are a result of the things he discovered while researching his book: “It is very obvious and easy to give people advisory about environmental friendly life, when you are analyzing lifestyles in your pieces – but it should not be overkill. It should not be too active, too radical. When the promotion of your stories have more in common with a political campaign, we will lose readers. People could think that it is too political, it is not about them. Which is why I think it is okay to give people a few guidelines, without forcing yourself upon them” (Interview Mommers, June 14, 2019). Most employees at *De Correspondent* concern climate change not just as coverage of the state of our climate: “It is also a story about a better future. And we should give life to abstract topics and make them tangible. The government must take up its responsibility in this matter, as do businesses, and we too have our responsibilities. We are all responsible for climate change.” (Interview Kroft and Blok, *De Correspondent*, August 2, 2019).

Guardians of knowledge and activism

What is considered as too much activism is subjective. Which is why *De Correspondent* receives both positive and negative feedback on their activist productions. Team Engagement tries to motivate readers to share articles. Thus, messages can be formulated in a way that it connects with personal values. When Mayke and Daphne are shown a model of behavioral change, Daphne says: “I have never seen this model, but I am pretty sure we do all these things. We trigger people with information that they find useful to either control the image others have from them, or to spread information, or to persuade others. We think it through, but I think it would be weird if we, as *De Correspondent* would be consumed by how we could most effectively change people’s behavior. If we would do that, we would be more of an activist than a journalist.” (Interview Kroft and Blok, *De Correspondent*, August 2, 2019).

If the only goal for editors is to spread the articles

as much as they can, it would be helpful to follow models of behavioral change and marketing. However, the engagement editors are not prioritizing the exposure of the article, nor do they prioritize activism. Knowledge-based journalism aims to not misrepresent or overstate findings (Witsen and 2018), and team Engagement tries different approaches to make knowledge attractive. Sometimes that involves activist statements. The friction between shareable messages and knowledge-based messages is a challenge engagement editors are faced with on a daily basis. Their understanding of the online interactions and their approaches to campaigns are ways *De Correspondent* finds a different kind of balance: not a balance between activism and journalism, but a balanced way to continuously prioritize journalism over activism, and needs of the audience over needs of the correspondents.

CONSUMPTION AND OWNERSHIP

V

78 This chapter analyzes in what ways climate activism is interwoven with the consumption of journalistic articles about climate change. By connecting discourse analysis and direct observations with knowledge-based journalism as discussed in chapter I, the first section explains how knowledge is consumed and how readers respond to the authority of knowledge. The second section analyzes responses of audience and the ways they express trust or distrust. The final section discusses how readers respond to activism, and if they respond with resistance or enthusiasm. Before all of this, the employees at *De Correspondent* that have direct involvement with the readers are briefly introduced.

Gwen Martèl
Conversation
editor



Gwen supervises interactions on the platform of De Correspondent between members and correspondents under articles. She invites experts to join the conversations and monitors in order to maintain the high quality of the "contribution section".

Yahya Ouzahir
Member support



Whenever someone e-mails De Correspondent or cancels their membership, Yahya is the one to respond. He is in personal contact with every member that sends e-mails about research or any form, contributions or complaints.

5.1 KNOWLEDGE ACCORDING TO THE READERS

On *De Correspondent*'s platform members have the opportunity to talk with each other and with the correspondents about the topic at hand. These conversations are only available to people who are paying members of *De Correspondent* or experts that are invited by Gwen to join a conversation. Gwen verifies the titles of these individual experts. For example, a biology teacher comments under an article from Jelmer. If Gwen verified that this member is a biology teacher, it immediately increases the value of the comment, because it is accompanied with a certain expertise. In contrast, on social media the conversations under an article of *De Correspondent* website, or the "contribution section", are monitored by Gwen. Not in order to delete comments from people who disagree with the article, on the contrary, in order to remain critical of its journalism, *De Correspondent* motivates feedback and constructive critique. Gwen tells me this is not as common as it seems: "Several Dutch online news media have banned climate sceptics. I am not sure if I agree. I am actually happy we are not banning anybody, except if one starts offending people. If somebody is spreading nonsense, there are always enough members or correspondents that start the argument against it. I suppose everybody is busy with regaining trust in journalism and the ones that could get people to doubt its trustworthiness, are banned. I think you should give breathing space to the ones who disagree to disagree. You can't put them away." (Coffee with Gwen, *De Correspondent*, April 24, 2019).

Research proposed that readers of articles are not just passive recipients of a message. They play active roles in constructing and contributing to a narrative (Jaspal, Nerlich, and Cinnirella 2013). Gwen points this out by talking about banning users from the platform. The contribution section lives by mutual respect. As long as a correspondent approaches readers with respect – no matter how different their opinions are, the more likely it is that readers respect their knowledge and perspective. *De Correspondent* strives to use the expertise and different positions of readers in order to make sure their journalism is not becoming one sided. Valuable contributions from members are often given through personal e-mails to the staff or by commenting underneath newsletters. Often contribution sections receive so many comments, it is hard to filter out what is important (Fieldnotes, exploded online conversation, July 17, 2019).

In assignment of team Engagement I received the task to collect relevant conversations under articles, sum-

marize them, and share them in newsletters. Through this task, I often interacted with Gwen about interesting conversations that are taking place across the platform. Sometimes an article received 800 comments in the contribution section. This was a positive environment for an extensive conversation due to the sharing of opinions, knowledge, experiences, and expertise. Comments, or better said contributions, are often in-depth responses to an item. But sometimes people lash out at each other in the contributions for having a strong opinion. When this happens, it is mostly with topics that are known to have strong opposite opinions, for instance, climate change or vaccinations. Gwen remarks: “It’s unbelievable, is it not. That someone else reads exactly the same as we do, but interprets it as if the correspondent is offending him.” (Fieldnotes, exploded online conversation, July 17, 2019). This is typical for polarizing topics. The conversations where people become emotional, get angry or misunderstand statements, are often topics that have the tendency to develop in two opposite groups of opinions.

Knowledge is reproduced differently by every single reader. A statement can easily be misinterpreted by a single user. The contribution sections give space for many members to interact and explore each others opinions, even with polarizing topics. If knowledge is communicated with emotional phrases or stories about “the other opinion”, correspondents risk that their knowledge is not taken serious. Whenever one takes a position, it is important to notice that a reader can understand a quote differently. And if readers interpreted a quote as judgemental towards them, it is likely that the texts will not be reproduced, responded to, or shared in the ways that the correspondent intended.

5.2 THE STITCH OF TRANSPARENCY

In the first chapter¹⁴, it was proposed that journalistic platforms could engage with their audience by letting their readers have some control over the conversation in order to increase transparency. Through the interaction with Gwen and Yahya, the readers often acknowledge their appreciation. However, as conversation editor and member support, they are also often enough confronted with negativity. Even though *De Correspondent* practices a lot of ways to increase their transparency, they are not always perceived as transparent as expected. *De Correspondent* is very idealistic and has high values (The Manifest, *De Correspondent* 2019).

¹⁴ Chapter I.II The norm of objectivity

Often enough members cancel their membership due to reasons that are somehow connected to the manifesto. But the feedback that is most striking, is that *De Correspondent* is perceived as too opinionated (Fieldnotes, coffee with Yahya, May 23, 2019). *De Correspondent* acknowledges its subjectivity and correspondents share their process in order to give members insight into their positions. Thus, they have the freedom to share their opinion. Altogether this sounds very good. However, not every single reader follows the complete process of a correspondent. Often enough readers only read one article that has caught their interest. If a reader takes one article as reference, and is not reading the complete process of a correspondent, then that one article might indeed seem opinionated. Even though *De Correspondent* is transparent, it is due to their transparent process, that they are vulnerable to being perceived as too opinionated. The concept of transparency is spread out over several articles, which can only be recognized by the members or readers that have followed the process of transparency along the way. If one has not followed this process, and reads one article written by a correspondent who is taking a position, the reader can easily count the conclusions of the correspondent as premature.

Let's take a look at the earlier discussed article from Jelmer Mommers¹⁵, which based on the chapter in his book: "Seven radical consequences of an increasingly warmer earth". This article has a disastrous tone of voice. Members from *De Correspondent* have the possibility of joining in conversation in the contribution section. Even though Jelmer's piece could be seen as alarming and too emotional, while possibly stating premature conclusions, the members are almost only responding positive and thanking Jelmer for the clear exposition of the effects from emissions. Furthermore, they are contributing more information to his article. This can be explained by (1) the position that members from *De Correspondent* already have about climate change. They are already on the same page as Jelmer, and are thankful somebody is writing it down so clearly. More interestingly, this can also be explained by (2) the fact that members have been previously exposed to the writing process of Jelmer. They understand how he came to these conclusions, and they understand that this is one of the few articles written by Jelmer that contains dominantly out of negative consequences. They know that the previous chapter/article was leading up to this article and that it is all part of a bigger story.

¹⁵ Chapter IV.I The process of social media

When exploring the comment section on Facebook, the tone is the total opposite. Out of the 250 comments on Facebook, almost every single comment as the tenor of the following comment from Jeroen: “What a horrible fear inducing piece. And factually incorrect. As if earth has ever followed our rules??? Well...”¹⁶ Even on the first comment we placed under the article on Facebook, which is overall more positive, people only respond negative¹⁷. It is no surprise that social media is not a great place to interact with readers. This is also the argument why *De Correspondent* avoids getting involved with discussions taking place on social media.

This example shows that the online media has its own discourse and reaches people who have not followed the transparent process of correspondents. When one sees an article on social media, without prior knowledge about the dispositions and findings that brought the correspondent to this conclusion, the tone of the correspondent can be interpreted as opinionated, premature, or even arrogant – as if they know what is the truth.

5.3 RESPONSES TO ACTIVISM

Extremely negative responses on social media could be explained by the resistance felt when audiences perceive a message as insincere or too persuasive. Prior research has identified three sources for resistance: persuasion, compliance, and change. Resistance to influence attempts is known as “reactance”, as is often clear when one looks at social media (Knowles and Riner 2005). Another possible outcome journalists should take into consideration is the paralyzing effect alarming messages often have on individuals, as they get the impression that the problem is too big and that personal actions are not useful or helpful enough. The individual solutions to climate change, presented side by side with dramatic and alarming messages is hypothesized to give the feeling of receiving false hope (Hagmann and Loewenstein 2019). It would be useful for journalists to take these responses into consideration when trying to persuade their audiences.

However, not all communication is taking place on social media. As discussed in previous chapters, Jelmer went to various events to speak about various climate change topics and his book, including the *Klimaatnacht*.

¹⁶ Wat een verschrikkelijke bangmakerij. En feitelijk onjuist. Alsof de aarde zich aan onze regels houdt??? Tja...

¹⁷ Zelfbenoemde “Klimaatcorrespondent” Jelmer Mommers. Je prijst je boek aan, maar misschien moet je alles nog eens goed herzien in het kader van de huidige klimaatverandering. Visies en bevindingen zijn sterk aan het veranderen binnen het ECHTE wetenschappersveld. Je kunt beter stoppen met het napraten van de verkeerde pseudo wetenschappers.

At the end of his talk there, he took almost twenty minutes to answer questions. He answered each question extensively and compliments the audience for its questions. Even though he just told a horror story, he is still bringing across a rather positive atmosphere (Fieldnotes *Klimaatnacht*, Pakhuis de Zwijger, June 7, 2019). Also in the online environment of *De Correspondent*, Jelmer is often thanking members for their comments and asking his audience for more of their questions (Mommers 2019). Often he asks members a question at the end of his articles, by which he acknowledges the position of the reader and shows regard for their input. For example, he wrote an article where he tries to motivate readers to start eating more plant-based food¹⁸. At the end of the article, he places a call to start of a conversation in the contribution section: “Adjusting your eating pattern is often a challenge. Do you manage? And how do you talk about this without being labelled as to if you are taking the moral high ground?”¹⁹. Jelmer is involving the reader into his process. This is possible within the online environment of *De Correspondent* and is also something the platform pursuing.

This chapter is concerned with the consumption of articles and possible responses of readers on social media and on *De Correspondent*. Through online and offline observations, it was found that correspondents who approach readers with a respect for different opinions, often receive that respect from their readers. As soon as emotions come into place, statements are easier to be misunderstood. It is important to note that not every reader follows the complete process of a correspondent, which explains further misunderstanding of the positions correspondents take in their pieces. Resistance from readers on social media can be explained by (1) paralyzing effect of alarming messages and (2) due to insincere or persuasive perceived messages. As long as a reader remains in the offline or online environment of *De Correspondent*, the correspondents are able to involve the reader into their process; outside of these realms, it is more difficult to maintain that involvement. This internal involvement is key in order to ensure a better discourse of *De Correspondent*’s articles, which are trying to motivate more environmental friendly behavior. Currently, it is an emotional topic, but one of which people are open to change their mind about, when it is based on mutual respect and understanding of their thought processes.

¹⁸ Wil je de wereldwijde opwarming effectief tegengaan? Begin dan bij het eten op je bord

¹⁹ Je eetpatroon aanpassen is vaak lastig. Lukt het jou? En hoe praat jij hierover zonder gelijk als ‘deugmens’ bestempeld te worden?

CONCLUSION

This research explores how climate journalism is interwoven with activism and how this interaction manifests itself throughout the production, dissemination, and consumption of articles about climate change. Three debates influence the relationship between climate journalism and activism: legitimization of knowledge, trustworthiness, and action. By temporarily joining the online journalistic platform *De Correspondent*, it was possible to observe these three debates while examining the interwoven constructs over the length of a journalistic process from start to finish.

Climate journalism is spreading information about specific topics regarding the climate, that might be difficult to understand, but concern every citizen on earth. Through interviews with a variety of journalists, it was found that climate journalists often do not perceive themselves as activists. Most of them do not think there should be balanced coverage about climate change.

De Correspondent is a media organization that follows several guidelines from scientific research when reporting on climate change. By observing these guidelines, it was found that their headlines often involve a certain kind of action or a broad conclusion. Their philosophy is idealistic, so the editorial team attempts to give these ideals substance through constant interaction and conversation within the team and throughout the whole company. This constant interaction between their journalism with their personal values influences the journalistic work. However, the employees of *De Correspondent* are not too concerned by this influence as they acknowledge it through transparency towards their readers. They find that this transparency often legitimizes the expression of their personal positions about climate change. When referencing the creation of an article for *De Correspondent*, “they/them/their” are used, showing that the articles about climate change are not written by one person. It is a result of an ongoing process that continues long after the article is published. Even the readers are included in the continuation of an article.

Climate change is found to be an emotional issue, also for the ones who produce, disseminate, or consume content on the topic. Within the case of *De Correspondent*, it is argued that emotions are recognized and allowed to be a part of the conversation. However, the emotions of the readers seem to often bring them to a reflection, where they might feel that journalists are telling them what or how to think about climate change. This is, however, best described in a quote by Cohen (1963): “The media can not

tell people what to think, but it can tell people what to think about.” And this is exactly what *De Correspondent* aims to achieve.

This remains the contestation around climate journalism. Journalists differentiate themselves from activism, but inherently, they want to convey these difficult topics to their readers and, possibly, tell them what to think. This desire conflicts with what their exclusive job as journalists is: to tell people what to think *about*. The point where the interaction between climate journalism and activism can cause confusion, is when a climate journalist simultaneously wants to tell people what to think about *and* tell them what to think.

Throughout the process of this research, my personal understanding of the problematic scope surrounding the communication about climate change grew. In the beginning, I distrusted some journalists and thought they were telling their audience what to think. At the end of the research, it became clear this topic is burdened with emotions and labels, which limit the individuals that try to make sense of climate change and the science behind it. Jelmer’s frustration about the activist label is understandable. However, as an intern of team Engagement, I discovered the difficulties of writing text on climate change without telling people what they must do. Activism within climate journalism becomes problematic when readers feel the journalist is trying to convince them to change their opinions. When trying to activate people to do something against climate change, it is best to try less hard to change people’s minds, but to try harder to spread the science behind climate change by making complicated knowledge more understandable.

This research shows that climate journalism is interwoven with activism through personal ideals and emotions, which are connected to a feeling of urgency. The rate of activism depends not only on a writer, but also on who disseminates and consumes the articles.

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FIELDNOTES

- 1 Fieldnotes, March 10, 2019
- 2 Interview preparation Crok, March 11, 2019
- 3 Contact Jeroen, March 12, 2019
- 4 Interview Loudi, March 14, 2019
- 5 Fieldnotes, March 18, 2019
- 6 Interview Crok, March 18, 2019
- 7 Interview Jeroen, March 18, 2019
- 8 Interview Ties, March 22, 2019
- 9 Fieldnotes on network event, April 4, 2019
- 10 Fieldnotes, first day De Correspondent, April 16, 2019
- 11 Fieldnotes, April 17, 2019
- 12 Fieldnotes, first impressions, April 19, 2019
- 13 Fieldnotes, first week De Correspondent, April 19, 2019
- 14 Fieldnotes, April 22, 2019
- 15 Writers Meeting, April 22, 2019
- 16 Fieldnotes, April 23, 2019
- 17 Participatory observations, April 23, 2019
- 18 Coffee with Gwen, De Correspondent, April 24, 2019
- 19 Fieldnotes, editorial meeting, April 29, 2019
- 20 Fieldnotes, coffee with Yahya, May 23, 2019
- 21 Participant observations: disastrous article, May 27, 2019
- 22 Fieldnotes Klimaatnacht, Pakhuis de Zwijger, June 7, 2019
- 23 Interview Mommers, June 14, 2019
- 24 Fieldnotes, exploded online conversation, July 17, 2019
- 25 Interview Mommers, August 1, 2019
- 26 Fieldnotes, August 2, 2019
- 27 Interview Blok, De Correspondent, August 2, 2019
- 28 Interview Kroft and Blok, De Correspondent, August 2, 2019
- 29 Fieldnotes, talking with Rob Wijnberg, August 2, 2019

The media can not tell people what
to think, but can tell people what to
think about

– Cohen 1963