**The Israeli Media’s Role in Coping with Climate Change: The Perspective of Journalists and Columnists**

**Abstract**

Today’s climate crisis is currently considered the greatest threat to the planet and its inhabitants ever known. As in any multidimensional large-scale crisis, the media plays a central role in managing and coping with it. In addition to being one of the most effective tools for putting pressure on decision makers, the media also plays a central role in shaping relevant attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors among citizens.

Despite the fact that there is a particularly high probability that Israel will suffer the effects of climate change, climate media research in Israel is still in its infancy. In this context, the current study seeks to examine perspectives of Israeli journalists and columnists on the media’s role in all matters pertaining to the climate crisis.

To that end, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted during March–April of 2021 with members of the media who deal with climate change. An analysis of the interview transcriptions indicates that the participants all shared the perception that the media was failing in its coverage of the crisis. The explanations they provided included fierce competition over the news agenda (mainly when positioned against security issues), financial and political pressure placed on the news outlets, the exceptional complexity of the topic, and a lack of cooperation on the part of editors.

The participants proposed two main solutions for improving how the media functioned in regard to covering the crisis: reframing the entire field and providing dedicated training to journalists and editors on how to cover the climate crisis.

**Introduction**

The climate crisis is currently considered the greatest threat to the planet and its inhabitants ever known (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Bolsen et al., 2019; Brüggemann & Engesser, 2017; Houghton et al., 1996; Houghton et al., 2001; Rabinowitz, 2020; Watson et al., 1997). The recent report published in August 2021 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), considered the foremost authority in the field (Climate Change, 2021), apparently indisputably and finally refuted the last of the sceptics’ claims regarding the scope of the impact climate change is expected to have on our lives.

As in every multidimensional large-scale crisis, the media plays a central role in managing and coping with the situation. Accordingly, recent decades have seen the emergence of a research field known as “climate media,” in which researchers investigate various aspects of the media’s effect on how the fight against the climate crisis is managed (Anderson, 2009; Antilla, 2005, 2010; Boykoff, 2011; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, 2007; Lowe et al., 2006; Nisbet, 2019; O’Neill et al., 2015; Rode & Fischbeck, 2021; Schäfer, 2012; Schäfer & Schlichting, 2014; Willig et al., 2021). Similar to their conduct in other sociopolitical contexts, the media is considered to play a major role in applying pressure on decision makers on the one hand, and shaping relevant attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors among civilians on the other.

Despite the fact that there is a particularly high probability that Israel will suffer the effects of climate change, mainly due to its innate geopolitical conditions (Brachya, 2013; Michaels & Alpert, 2013; Rabinowitz, 2009; Rabinowitz, 2020), climate media research in Israel is still in its infancy. One explanation for the limited interest in climate change lies in the fact that the political discourse in Israel does not generally revolve around the issue. Among the reasons for this is the relative urgency of other issues considered to be more “burning,” chiefly the issue of security (Bar-Tal & Carmi, 2012; Bookman; 2021; Nossek, 2019). In addition, and as a natural consequence, media attention to environmental issues in general and the climate crisis in particular has been extremely poor (Katz-Kimchi, 2013; Mekelberg, 2012). The few studies that have examined climate media in Israel have only reinforced the bleak outlook regarding the climate crisis’s status in the political, public, and media discourse (Nossek, 2010, 2019; Nossek & Kunelius, 2012; Rabinowitz, 2020).

This work aims to contribute to the limited body of knowledge regarding media and climate in Israel. Through a series of in-depth interviews, it seeks to examine the perspective of Israeli climate journalists and columnists on how the media is functioning in the context of the climate crisis, in terms of both the current situation and of what is desirable and possible to achieve.

**Climate Media around the World**

In recent decades, the scope of research dedicated to various aspects of media and climate has been expanding. Many researchers consider the media an effective mechanism for advancing legislative processes and shaping pro-climate policies, whether by raising public awareness and shaping public opinion for the purpose of applying pressure on decision makers, or by applying direct pressure on public leaders and politicians (Borth et al., 2021; Brüggemann & Engesser, 2017; McDonald, 2009; Stamm et al., 2000). Other researchers find the media’s conduct regarding the climate crisis dysfunctional. Antilla (2005) notes how major media outlets in the United States used to present the scientific stance on the climate crisis as controversial, presenting it together with opposing voices in the name of fundamental journalistic values, as if the two sides had equal merit in relation to a debatable issue. Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) and Petersen et al. (2019) reached similar conclusions regarding the destructive effect Western media’s demand for balance and neutrality had on the exposure given to those representing the official scientific approach. Boykoff and Roberts (2007) also referred extensively to the series of restrictions that made it difficult for the media to realize its potential to contribute to the fight against the climate crisis.

Recognizing the media’s power and influence, several researchers have raised the concern that the media may actually hinder global efforts to limit the damage caused by climate change, especially given the deliberate distribution of false information on social media by elements known as “climate deniers” (Antilla, 2010; Menezes, 2018; Nettlefold & Pecl, 2022; Painter et al., 2018).

Since the start of work in the field, researchers have examined the media’s role in promoting climate mitigation processes, referring to the power and nature of the media’s influence regarding the measures taken to reduce climate change’s destructive effects (Boycoff & Roberts, 2007). The media is one of the most effective tools for distributing relevant information to citizens, activists, and decision makers, as it is a central and at times exclusive source of knowledge about climate change, its dangers, and the possible actions for slowing its resulting devastating processes (Boycoff & Roberts, 2007). The media is a key element in effectively exposing harmful legislative measures and policies, engaging the public in pro-environmental activities, and pressuring relevant decision makers to place the climate crisis on the top of their agenda (Cox, 2013; Holbert et al., 2003; Liu et al., 2011; Painter et al., 2018; Stamm et al., 2000; Whitmarsh et al., 2013). In recent years, with the crisis deepening and scientific forecasts becoming increasingly severe, research has been diverted to analyzing how the media functioned in terms of supplemental activity. This refers to adaptation processes intended meant to involve a comprehensive evaluation of life in the shadow of the climate crisis on the individual, local, national and global levels (Borth et al., 2021; Bowden et al., 2021; Boykoff & Roberts, 2007; Donkor et al., 2019; Romsdahl et al., 2017; Whitmarsh et al., 2013).

Many studies have focused on analyzing how the climate crisis was represented in various media texts, both visual and verbal, including journalistic content (Antilla, 2010; Boykoff, 2008; Carvalho, 2007; Doyle, 2007; Olausson, 2009). Comparative studies have investigated quantitative and qualitative changes in the media’s representation of the crisis, as well as questions regarding reframing and the use of metaphors over the years (Boykoff & Roberts, 2007; Schäfer & Schlichting, 2014; Schäfer & Painter, 2021). Another central issue that has been investigated is how cultural norms shape coverage patterns of the climate crisis and how these patterns differ in various countries and cultures (Boykoff & Roberts, 2007; Evans, 2016).

An additional large group of studies focuses on media audiences, whether from the perspective of the audience through audience reception studies (Corbett & Durfee, 2004; Olausson, 2011; Stamm et al., 2000) or by analyzing the effect of the coverage on audiences. The latter investigate the relationship between media exposure and perceptions and attitudes regarding the climate crisis, and how these relate to pro-environmental and “pro-climate” behaviors and related voting patterns (Boykoff & Roberts, 2007; Holbert et al., 2003; Lowe et al., 2006). Particularly salient among these latter studies are those investigating how the various ways of reframing the crisis affected public opinion (Arlt et al., 2011; Bell, 1994a, 1994b; Bolsen et al., 2019; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Lakoff, 2010; McDonald, 2009; Motta et al., 2021).

A third group of media and climate studies addresses professional-organizational aspects of journalistic work and their implications on how the media functions in the context of the crisis. Many of these studies describe how the shrinking of news organizations globally in recent years has diminished the resources allocated for covering the climate crises (Borth et al., 2021; Boykoff & Yulsman, 2013; Nettlefold & Pecl, 2022; Schäfer & Painter, 2021). Other studies focus on climate journalists’ and columnists’ perspective, examining the limitations and pressures they face in attempting to increase the scope of climate crisis coverage. Some of this pressure arises from within the organization and some is external, coming from various economic and political elements (Anderson, 2009; Borth et al., 2021; Boykoff & Roberts, 2007; Boykoff & Yulsman, 2013; Nettlefold & Pecl, 2022; Schäfer & Painter, 2021). An example of a major journalistic challenge stemming from the political reality in the West is that for many years, the climate crisis was perceived as being identified with leftists and liberals. “Climate deniers” and those most vigorously opposing holding humans responsible for the climate crisis were typically right-wing conservatives. Thus, journalists seeking to cover the issue and reach as broad an audience as possible had to be highly creative, and often failed to communicate the scientific version of the crisis to the conservative camp (Hart & Feldman, 2021; Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Lakoff, 2010; Motta et al., 2021).

Another issue receiving research attention is the challenge the climate crisis poses to professional “communicators,” as it is a particularly complex topic with abundant scientific data and concepts. Journalists therefore face a dual challenge: they must grasp the complexity of the issue themselves while simultaneously communicating it reliably and effectively to the lay public (Bell 1994a, 1994b; Kunelius, 2019; McDonald, 2009; Menezes, 2018).

The tension between the desire to cover the climate crisis accurately and professionally and fundamental journalistic norms has occupied several prominent climate media researchers (Antilla, 2005; Boykoff, 2011; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Hiles & Hinnant, 2014; Petersen et al., 2019). For years, the widespread assumption was that adhering to these norms made climate deniers overly prominent, as Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) found in their groundbreaking study. However, Brüggemann and Engesser (2017) point to a significant changing trend. A comparative analysis of articles on climate change from around the world led them to identify a change in coverage trends, primarily the shift from balanced to interpretive journalism, with the researchers contending that journalists now cover climate deniers who oppose the IPPC’s principles solely to critically examining their arguments and weaken their voices and image in the public’s opinion.

**Climate Media in Israel**

Israel’s geographical location and the geopolitical conditions characterizing it and its environment render it particularly vulnerable to climate change (Brachya, 2013; Michaels & Alpert, 2013; Rabinowitz, 2009; Rabinowitz, 2020). One of the clearest examples of this is the complex implications of the regional water shortage. As the crisis deepens, this shortage is expected to aggravate the political and security instability between Israel and its neighbors (Rabinowitz, 2009).

In light of increasingly severe forecasts regarding the pace of the crisis’s progression, and especially considering Israeli researchers’ involvement in climate and the environment, the nascent state of climate media in Israel is puzzling. Apparently, fierce competition over the media, public, and political agenda that pits national security against climate change is a leading explanation for the crisis’s lack of prominence in both the public and political discourse. It also explains the limited scope of studies devoted to the issue to date (Bar-Tal & Carmi, 2012; Bookman, 2021; Katz-Kimchi, 2013; Mekelberg, 2012; Nossek, 2019; Shar & Deckett, 2020). In fact, very few climate media studies have been conducted in Israel and most of these analyze coverage patterns of major international climate conferences and other climate events, as well as mapping general trends in climate coverage in traditional and new media. Some of these studies examined the attitudes of several environmental and climate journalists regarding the coverage of specific events (Katz-Kimchi, 2013; Nossek, 2010, 2019; Nossek & Kunelius, 2012).

Shar and Deckett (2020) recognized the severity of the crisis as well as the complacency with which it was met in the public, media, and political discourse in Israel. Consequently, they called for the public’s widespread use of social media to raise the issue to the top of the agenda and obligate decision makers, who are sensitive to public opinion, to drive the relevant political and national processes.

**Method**

From March–May 2021, we conducted 25 in-depth interviews with media representatives who focus on the climate crisis exclusively or as part of a range of coverage and topics.

After mapping all the members of the Israeli media (from major and other outlets, traditional and new media) dealing with climate change, the researcher approached journalists and columnists and asked them to participate in the study. The response rate was very high; only one journalist declined.

Participants included two scientists with regular environment and climate columns in popular news sites, six journalists covering the environment and climate as their exclusive field of coverage, two editors who write as journalists on the topic, and 15 journalists who covered the environment and climate as one of several coverage fields. (In the months since collecting the data, a journalist who had covered climate as a secondary field has been appointed as the first journalist in Israel with the title “climate crisis correspondent.”)

Eighteen of the in-depth interviews were held on Zoom, due both to taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic and to accommodate convenience considerations raised by the participants. Four interviews were conducted over the phone (at the participants’ choice) and three in person, in locations chosen by the participants. The researcher assured the participants that she would refrain from publishing their names and other identifying details that could link them to what they said in the interviews. After obtaining the participants’ consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and underwent thematic analysis (Orbe, 1998) based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

**Findings and Discussion**

This part of the paper presents the key points that arose in the in-depth interviews. It begins with the journalists’ general assessment of how the media was functioning in regard to the climate crisis, followed by their explanations for it. The chapter ends with a series of suggestions they made for improving the Israeli media’s performance in relation to the climate crisis.

**The Israeli Media’s Performance in the Climate Crisis: A Resounding Failure**

Based on an analysis of the interview transcriptions, the participants all shared the view that the media was failing in its coverage of the crisis. A veteran climate journalist defined it well: “We have a serious problem with the media. When it comes to the environment, the media is failing massively, a complete and utter failure.” “We messed up when we didn’t put enough of a focus on it when it started,” said a young climate journalist who had just started working in the field. A veteran investigative journalist specializing in the environment and climate in recent years referred to those responsible for the media’s ongoing failure to cover the crisis. In her opinion, these were the editors and other decision makers in the media: “Many people don’t understand much about these issues, as a result of years of ongoing neglect by the government, as well as [by] editors and journalists.” A journalist from a media outlet covering environmental and climate issues relatively extensively mentioned the implications of the media’s dysfunctional conduct regarding climate: “There’s such a low level of knowledge, awareness and understanding here compared to what we see in other places.”

The participants described how the media barely dealt with the climate crisis, pushing it off the news agenda (and consequently off the public and political agenda). A journalist from one of the independent news sites dealing extensively with the crisis put it this way:

When people see more being written about this issue, they understand this is something that’s worthy of their attention. And that’s something the media isn’t doing enough of, in my opinion, or maybe it deliberately doesn’t write about certain topics.

A reporter from one of Israel’s major financial newspapers had similar things to say about the public’s complacency about the crisis:

The media plays a central role in this. I think we’re practically not doing anything about the issue. Getting it in at the end of a newscast?!? I think every newscast should open with climate change, all over the world… We’ve got to get it into our brains, and if the government isn’t doing it, then it’s the media’s job to do it.

According to the participants, the media struggled to present the magnitude of the threat, or possible solutions for mitigating it. As a climate reporter noted:

In fact, we’re facing the greatest challenge humankind has ever known, the issue that’s most relevant to the lives of our readers and their children, and I think we’re missing the biggest story there is. It’s going to affect all areas of our lives. It will bring down countries, create masses of refuges, and exacerbate inequality.

Another aspect of the media’s failure in covering the crisis from the participant’s perspective is how the media avoids identifying the political and financial elements responsible, at the very least, for preventing the implications of the crisis and the efforts to contain it to be addressed effectively. As one of the participants stated:

The focus should be on corporations and governments, not private individuals, and this is one thing not only the Israeli media, but the *New York Times* as well, consistently fail to do, always publishing articles about “how you need to improve,” “you,” as an individual.

A reporter from one of the online news sites covering the climate crisis as one among other fields of coverage had similar things to say:

No one really has an interest to bring it [the climate crisis] up, therefore it always remains within the realms of “nice”…We refer to it, but we don’t put the blame on specific people… There’s a problem, but who’s responsible for it? Well, there’s global warming, that has nothing to do with us. It’s the universe that’s getting warmer.

There was a consensus among participants regarding the “distribution of blame” among the various media: Commercial television channels were perceived as having the largest gap between potential influence and scope and quality of coverage. One journalist claimed that for the commercial channels, “it’s as if the climate crisis doesn’t exist,” and another journalist added: “It’s still very marginal in the strong and major media outlets in Israel, and it’s a terrible shame.”

The participants’ arguments are congruent with most researchers’ harsh criticism of the media (Boykoff & Roberts, 2007; Nisbet, 2019; Nossek 2010, 2019; Willig et al., 2021). However, much like the participants who identified a positive change of trend in recent months, researchers also point to a recent improvement in the amount and quality of coverage in many media around the world (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2017; Nisbet 2019; Willig et al., 2021).

**Key Explanations for the Phenomenon**

***Competition over the News Agenda***

Among the participants’ explanations for the Israeli media’s conduct were the security situation and later the COVID–19 crisis – two major competitors for the news agenda. The participants largely agreed that the media’s minor attention to the climate crisis was not surprising, given its longstanding chronic neglect of environmental issues. This, despite the expectation that we would see a much clearer change in trend given the crisis’s increasing intensity. According to a veteran investigative reporter, “In a country like ours, where what’s important is the political-security issue and governments change twice a year, the environment has been neglected and pushed aside.” Another veteran environment and climate journalist added:

The discourse in Israel is very “here and now,” the asthmatic discourse that constantly focuses on “Iran Iran Iran” and housing prices and all of that, and that really keeps the issue removed from the Israeli public, or big parts of it.

An environment and climate journalist at a media outlet identified with the political right voiced a similar argument regarding the media’s limited interest in the climate crisis: “It’s because of Iran, and because we’re always surrounded by enemies seeking to annihilate us.” A reporter covering climate along with other issues in one of the daily newspapers shared another interesting perspective: “The sense of threat has been greatly incited by politicians… And when people feel they’re under threat, there’s no room for anything else.”

Competition over media, public, and political attention, in which the ongoing security situation receives greater priority than the climate crisis, was referred to in the vast majority of studies dealing with coverage of the crisis in the Israeli reality (Bar-Tal & Carmi, 2012; Bookman, 2021; Katz-Kimchi, 2013; Mekelberg, 2012; Nossek, 2010, 2019; Shar & Deckett). However, this occurs in other countries as well. Boykoff and Roberts (2007) wrote extensively about the fierce competition environment and climate issues faced against issues considered far more pressing in the United States. Rauchfleisch et al., (2021), who examined climate change coverage in Switzerland, demonstrated how, over time, the climate crisis was pushed to the margins of the news due to media, public, and political attention being diverted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

***Financial and Political Pressure***

Another explanation relevant to all commercial media, particularly television channels, involves financial interests motivating many media outlet owners, which lead them to avoid attacking major polluting entities. Research literature around the world has dealt extensively with the harmful implications of financial and political pressure placed on news editors and directly on journalists who cover environmental and climate issues. Much of the financial pressure comes from major advertisers, who fear that preoccupation with the link between polluting industries and the climate crisis will harm their status. As Boycoff and Roberts (2007) described it:

The difficult position of the media in capitalist society is that commercial news outlets require huge amounts of advertising to pay their salaries and other expenses, and the greatest advertisers are for automobiles, real estate, airlines, fast food, and home furnishings. To create demand for real mitigation of climate change emissions would require the media to repeatedly and insistently call for truly revolutionary changes in society, precisely away from consumption of the products of their advertisers. (p. 34)

Other financial pressure comes from commercial media outlet owners (and/or their partners), in cases where media moguls have holdings in polluting factories. These exploit their direct control over the media to dictate minimal coverage of environmental and climate news that is harmless to them (Boycoff & Boycoff, 2004; Boycoff & Yulsman, 2013; Rabinowitz, 2009; Shafer & Painter, 2020). Furthermore, Anderson (2009) notes that the ongoing pressure causes newsrooms in general, and environment and climate reporters in particular, to censor themselves in advance. A journalist from an independent news website addressed the issue:

In the end, it’s directly related to those who control the media channels, even if they control it indirectly. The Israeli market is highly centralized. Even if the Ofer family doesn’t own any media outlets themselves, they have access to the decision makers.

The participants included journalists working in commercial media outlets, columnists who publish their analyses on major new sites for no financial remuneration, and journalists working in public or alternative/independent media outlets. Despite the different perspectives stemming from their organizational affiliations, all the participants pointed to the existence and detrimental influence of financial pressures. Some had experienced it directly, while others had heard about the phenomenon from their colleagues. As a reporter from one of the major news sites claimed:

There’s nothing to do about it, the media’s business model currently relies on those who own the media outlets, who are also tycoons with connections and interests. [Covering] the environment is not in their interest. It damages them financially. It’s not in their interest to publish articles against the gas reservoirs or what’s happening in the Dead Sea.

A climate reporter from a public media outlet shared her impressions regarding the financial pressure placed on journalists in the field:

In the gas rig story, not everyone got the same amount of coverage as there was in the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation. They took very strong people from the media, like Nadav Perry… They know how to operate… You get a phone call, that’s moderate pressure… That’s the advantage of working in a public corporation that’s not subject to these kinds of pressures.

A veteran environment and climate journalist related:

Every time I’d broach anything to do with the Haifa bay or Idan Ofer, the owner of the oil refineries and so on and so forth, the researcher and editor would get scared… I saw it, and it was obvious that the newsroom was terrified, that there was self-censorship going on. It was clear to me that there was also pressure.

A journalist covering the climate crisis for a distinctly socialist-oriented newspaper summarized the issue thus: “Most media today are right wing-financial. Environmental journalists are a strange beast in this reality.”

Along with financial pressure, and as a natural consequence, the participants reported political pressure placed on them intended to influence their coverage of “sensitive” environmental and climate issues. This political pressure comes mainly from the relevant government ministries (e.g. the Environmental Protection and Energy Ministries) protesting the allegedly critical presentation of legislative measures that have (or have not) been taken. As a journalist from a public media outlet described it: “I get criticized by the Energy Ministry’s spokespeople, someone’s criticizing me there, saying my coverage isn’t balanced enough.”

Other kinds of political pressures may come from outside these government ministries, aimed at helping tycoons fearing media coverage of their affairs. A journalist from one of the daily newspapers that often covers the climate crisis shared:

Just two days ago, I had a very unpleasant conversation with the head of the Veterinary Services… We got into an argument, telling me I wasn’t professional because I have an agenda. And I got letters from lawyers, every time I approached companies I’d get letters threatening me with lawsuits. The first time is scary, but then you stop getting scared, because you understand it’s how they operate.

***The Climate Crisis: Between the Right and the Left***

Another political aspect affecting climate coverage can be found on the ideological spectrum between right and left, economic and social values, conservatives and liberals. In most countries around the world, environmental struggles, and particularly the fight against the climate crisis, is identified with the liberal left. On the other hand, “climate deniers” who protect polluting industries and object to holding humans responsible for the climate crisis generally identify with the conservative right. This is not the place to try to explain the roots of this phenomenon; however, its very existence makes it very difficult for climate journalists in Israel and around the world to do their job. Hart and Feldman (2021), Motta et al. (2021) and Hart and Nisbet (2012) note the level of caution climate journalist must take when reporting on the crisis, so as not to lose audiences who identify with the conservative right. Lakoff (2010) too, addressed the challenge of framing the crisis for those seeking to reach as broad an audience as possible in terms of political affiliation. Poortinga et al. (2019) found that in Israel, like in every European country, individuals’ attitudes toward the climate crisis often reflected their political opinions. Leftists tend to identify more with the urgency of dealing with the crisis, while most right-wing voters see it as a “leftist issue” that has no real effect on their lives.

Most of the participants discussed this sensitive issue. The fact that the climate crisis is identified with the political left makes it difficult for right-wing media to cover it. An environment and climate journalist working for several media outlets mentioned conversations he had had with right-wing members of the media: “These Bennett[[1]](#footnote-1) guys said to me, ‘Yes, but we have a problem talking about it to our public because they’ll say, ‘What? Have you turned into Meretz[[2]](#footnote-2) or something?’”

Identifying the climate crisis with the left also presents a challenge to media outlets trying to appeal to broad audiences that are concerned about alienating the rightists among them. In this context, a journalist from one of the daily newspapers said, “It’s always seen as a leftist issue, and leftist issues are always pushed aside.”

The perspective of those few journalists who cover the climate crisis in right-wing media was particularly interesting. A young reporter working in a media outlet identified with the right had this to say:

Our newspaper deals with security and politics. Awareness of this issue [the climate crisis] was raised by a class that could afford to be aware of it, to go out and demonstrate. Ultimately, rightists don’t belong as much to this socioeconomic circle, and it’s become deep-rooted. Someone once wrote to me that it [climate change] was a “leftist invention.” That [phenomenon] totally exists. It doesn’t interest anyone focused on survival.

***The Complexity of the Issue***

For many years, the research literature has been studying the massive challenge faced by those seeking to cover the crisis due to its immense complexity (Bell 1994a, 1994b; Gibson et al., 2016; Kunelius et al., 2017; McDonald, 2009; Peterson et al., 2019). This involves two different yet complementary fronts. First, journalists need to teach themselves the fundamental concepts, key scientific findings, and forecasts that change from time to time, all of which are scientific in nature and phrased in a language foreign to anyone outside the field. A journalist who pioneered the field in Israel described his experience:

I learned it on the job, it really grabbed me, I’m not an example… but journalists who enter the field need to undergo training. If there was a course that could train them, that would be great, to teach them the fundamental concepts, so they understand the causality, because it really is confusing a lot of the time… Mainly, they need to know how to distinguish between what is and what isn’t important.

The second front involves making the information accessible to the public in a way that is clear and interesting, while still being reliable and sound. Beyond the complex scientific issues, the participants addressed the fact that some climate issues were arguably beyond readers’ understanding, being quite abstract and/or too overwhelming or intimidating, making it impossible to fathom the depth of the crisis. As a prominent climate journalist described:

It’s very complicated to make the public understand the urgency. It’s complicated to understand that we’re going to die from air pollution and not a terrorist attack. It’s complicated to understand that food is expensive and will become even more so due to extreme climate events.

Another well-known television reporter who occasionally deals with global aspects of the crisis added:

The climate crisis requires a technical understanding. It involves thermodynamic, physical elements. It’s based in science… The main problem is that it’s rooted in the future, or in things that are difficult to prove have a direct causal relationship to the climate crisis.

The inherent complexity of the topic is intensified by the chronic shortage of human and other resources prevalent in most Western media outlets (Borth et al., 2021; Menezes, 2018; Nettlefold & Pecl, 2022; Shafer & Pianter, 2020). As a result, most media organizations struggle to provide their employees with the necessary training and time for learning the topic. A reporter from an online magazine said, “Everything I know I researched myself…I have [had] no specialized training or education and not much of a budget for dealing with the issue.”

Furthermore, most media outlets do not allocate specific positions for covering the climate crisis and reporters who are busy covering a series of other topics are required to learn and convey the already complex issue to audiences. One of the participants explained: “They make you an ‘environmental reporter’ in addition to your role. The environment is an issue you deal with on top of everything else.” A prominent climate journalists simply stated: “We don’t have the conditions for producing good climate journalism.”

**The Greatest Challenge of All: Editors**

In an attempt to explain the Israeli media’s dysfunctional coverage of the climate crisis the participants discussed a number of challenges they faced. However, the most salient of these in terms of scope and complexity was that posed by editors. A small group of journalists that included representatives from *Ha’aretz*, *The Marker*, *Globes*[[3]](#footnote-3) and the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, and an even smaller number of journalists from other media outlets, described how fortunate they were to have editors who recognized the severity of the crisis and its newsworthiness. They described these editors as working to remove obstacles and restrictions from their path and “backing them up” whenever necessary. In contrast, all the other participants described the many obstacles their editors placed before them.

Climate media researchers have already recognized the powerful influence news editors have on the media’s ability to realize its potential to contribute to addressing the crisis. According to these researchers, while editors carry a lot of weight in every field of coverage, the climate crisis’s specific characteristics makes them particularly and profoundly influential (Gibson et al., 2016; Olausson & Berglez, 2014; Smith, 2005).

How, then are the difficulties news editors place on climate reporters expressed? According to some of the participants, editors tend to underestimate the public’s interest in the climate crisis, while journalists and columnists clearly see that the public’s interest is only increasing over time. This argument regarding Israeli citizens’ considerable interest in climate change is congruent with several findings of Laslo and Baram-Tsabari’s (2019). A study conducted by Borth el al. (2021) also pointed to a significant gap between the public’s actual interest in climate change and the perceptions of news editors in the United States.

This assumption on the part of editors results in the highly selective acceptance of ideas and written content. Even a journalist from an independent news site dedicated to covering the crisis conceded that:

Ultimately, like in any media outlet, there’s the issue of how interested our readers will be in what we write. I had many written articles that were too pro-climate. Not that they were discarded, but when we discussed that matter we realized that it would miss the mark… We need to explain it to people gradually.

Evidently, the fierce competition prevalent mainly among online news sites leads editors to be extremely selective, as the same reporter described: “News editors have become addicted to clickbait, whatever brings in more ratings, whatever gets people to cry the most.” Another reporter from an independent news site added: “Editors and publishers only care about traffic… It’s very difficult to sell to editors. You need to find a very, very special angle to get it greenlighted.” Another reporter from an online magazine attested to similar responses from editors: “The say to me, it’s not interesting enough, it won’t get clicks… They blow me off. It sucks.”

According to the participants, news editors do not recognize the magnitude of the climate crisis and are not knowledgeable about the data and forecasts, and this is yet another reason why they have difficulty providing it with an appropriate platform. For example, an environment and climate reporter active in several media outlets shared that:

There really is a problem with the many challenges characterizing the field, including lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of editors. I was always fortunate enough to work with editors who understood…There was an environment reporter who worked on Channel 2 for many years. She would come to the chief editors and say, ‘I have something interesting,’ and they would say ‘Oh no, there she goes again… well okay then, whatever, do a story about it.’ And then, at best, they would air it at the end of the news broadcast, or they’d just cut it out. Terrible frustrations.

A journalist from a public media outlet added, “Editors in the media don’t fully understand the scope of the catastrophe we’re facing,” while another reporter asserted, “Editors say to me, ‘Okay, that’s very nice, but…’ The problem isn’t with the journalists but with the list of priorities on the agenda, with what the more major decision makers decide is right for them.” Gibson et al. (2015) described similar findings from a study conducted among American climate journalists:

Insert quote from Gibson et al. in long quote format xxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxx xx xxxxxxx xxxxxxxx etc. (p. 8)

The climate and environment fields suffer from simplistic, lightweight, and ineffective framing due to, among other reasons, editors’ misperception of the crisis and the importance the public attributes to it. As a reporter working for one of the daily newspapers and an independent news site observed:

I think the branding is wrong. “Global warming” is an abysmal term for it… We’re not actually seeing temperatures rise ourselves… People don’t know how to attribute it to what’s happening, they don’t understand that it’s a result… The issue suffers from bad PR.

Another environment and climate reporter added, “This is the impression - the environment is an abstract, vague, global, and distant issue that’s associated with privileged tree huggers and rare beetle huggers, a global universal discourse.” In the same vein, an investigative reporter specializing in the field had this to say: “Until recently the environment was seen as a ‘very nice’ issue… The environment meant almond trees blossoming in the spring and snow in winter, and no one took it seriously enough.”

**Possible Solutions for Making the Israeli Media More Effective**

When asked what they would do differently if only they could, the participants’ answers were divided into two categories. The first consisted of far-reaching and not necessarily feasible solutions uttered from the depth of their hearts. As a leading climate journalist in Israel said: “I would fire all the editors… Kick out all the media owners who are driven by personal interests.” Another reporter just starting out in the field in a public media outlet hoped for the following:

To not be scared about bringing it up, making it heard. There’s no shame in having it be on the cover, even if it’s not “new.” To constantly give it a platform, to make room for it in the first place.

A third climate reporter working in a newspaper highly devoted to promoting the issue added:

It needs to be on television a lot more. Its absence is really palpable. It needs be on the news every single evening, until it becomes a regular part of the agenda. Environmental corruption needs to be exposed a lot more.

The second category of answers consisted of practical suggestions the participants believed would make the Israeli media more effective in covering the climate crisis. Two suggestions were particularly salient: reframing the issue and providing training for journalists and editors.

**Reframing**

In an aim to increase the appeal of climate crisis coverage, first in the eyes of editors and later in the eyes of the public (enough for the public to demand its elected officials treat the crisis with the utmost gravity), most of the participants suggested changing how the issue was framed, handled, and presented to the public. A journalist working for a right-wing media outlet raised a particularly interesting suggestion: highlighting security aspects as part of the coverage and clarifying the connection between national security and the climate crisis, in light of the fact that in Israel the entire issue of security is highly prominent in the media. In her own words:

I think the whole story with the ship and the oil… the reason it received so much coverage, why was it? Because they saw it as a security issue. For two weeks it was all, ‘Is it Iran? Is it a terrorist attack?’ Suddenly it was important, it has that kind of impact.

This idea echoes the findings and arguments media and climate researchers have raised in recent years (Flusberg et al., 2017; Hart & Feldman, 2018, 2021; Motta et al., 2021) and finds expression in an interview Bookman (2021) conducted with a researcher whose work combined the fields of climate and security.

A broader aspect of reframing involves liberating the climate crisis from the limited and “less prestigious” niche in which it is currently being covered. Many journalists noted the logic and effectiveness of emphasizing the crisis’s relevance to each and every leading coverage field, chiefly politics, the economy, and security. A veteran climate reporter noted the advantages of reframing:

In reality, the environment is what we come in contact with in our daily lives. It hurts everyone, it affects transportation, urban planning and construction. Israelis love nature, they long for nature. The environment affects our money, our health, our quality of life. And we don’t understand the connection. These are issues that interest everyone, right and left. It’s everyone’s problem.

A researcher who writes columns on the crisis in leading websites raised similar arguments:

We need to approach people about environmental issues from all kinds of angles. We need to explain to them how it affects their pocket, how it affects education, their children’s future… I don’t want to talk about the environment only in relation to a national park that was impacted or beaches that were harmed or air pollution caused by industry.

Another climate journalist added, “The environment is not an area of coverage that should be kept in some kind of ghetto. It needs to be part of every field for us to see any kind of change.” A young climate reporter summed it up perfectly:

The main thing is simply connecting the dots… Let’s say you have the field of transportation. It’s totally related to the environment. Everything depends on how you look at it. Foreign affairs, most of the wars we have now and that we’ll have in the future are connected to it. In every coverage field, interior affairs, agriculture, consumerism, they all have environmental aspects that are generally hidden. We shouldn’t necessarily develop a separate field for it, but provide the environmental perspective on everything.

This argument is congruent with that of Lakoff (2010), one of the prominent researchers on framing, in regard to the most effective way of dealing with environmental and climate issues: “…the environment is not just about the environment. It is intimately tied up with other issue areas: economics, energy, food, health, trade, and security” (p. 76).

**Training**

The second solution the participants raised was creating a training system for environmental and climate journalists and editors. The participants’ basic premise was that training journalists would make them better professionals at covering the crisis and making it accessible to the public. Regarding editors, the participants believed training would bring the climate crisis closer to their world, make them aware of its severity, and cause them to use whatever tools they had at their disposal to fight against it. In fact, this is how the participants expressed their great frustration: they found themselves failing to “sell” stories about the climate crisis to editors and convince them it was worthy of a bigger and more respectable platform, knowing that exposing editors to objective information from external professional sources could lead to the long-awaited turnabout. In this context, a reporter from a daily newspaper argued, “providing training about the environment to editors, reporters, and opinion leaders, a type of course […] Ultimately, if you want to effect change, you need education. Education for journalists and editors.” Another reporter also referred to the necessity of training news editors: “It’s something that should resonate with everyone. The first step is simply providing information. Most editors don’t know enough.” A senior journalist in the field described what she would change in the current reality, if only she could: “I’d install normal editors who were aware of the issue, and force all the editors and journalists to undergo some training and take some courses.” The same journalist also referred to British and American projects for training members of the media on covering the crisis as a source of inspiration that should be emulated. A similar notion can be found in Menezes (2018) paper on the importance of scientific training for climate journalists and editors.

In fact, initial steps in this desirable direction began to take form during this study. One of the participants, a young, vigorous, and highly motivated journalist has managed to organize a free multidisciplinary course about the climate at Tel Aviv University intended exclusively for journalists and editors. This journalist stated that she sought to reach reporters across a range of fields, not just climate reporters, based on the understanding that the climate crisis was relevant to every field covered. She claimed that “many journalists are still ignorant when it comes to the environment and are not aware of the severity of the crisis,” and added: “Part of the solution needs to involve a joint dialogue between reporters about the issue.”

**Conclusion**

The study findings indicate that from the perspective of environmental and climate journalists, a wide gap exists between climate reality and the desirable conduct by the Israeli media in relation to the climate crisis. Popular media, chiefly the commercial television channels, relegate coverage of the crisis to the margins of the news. The fact that in some quality Israeli newspapers, the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, and a few independent news sites the scope and depth of coverage is immeasurably greater than in most other media is cold comfort, given that their audiences are relatively limited and generally already convinced of the severity of the crisis.

Similar explanations for the Israeli media’s failure to cover the climate crisis raised by the participants were surprisingly similar to those emerging from other Western countries, as evident from the research literature. The complexity of the issue, the financial and political pressure to prevent damage to outside interests, identifying the fight against the crisis with the political left, and competition from news topics considered more “burning” are not only the reality in Israel. The climate crisis is essentially a global crisis, and the causes hindering those seeking to provide broad coverage of the issue are common to many countries worldwide (albeit mostly Western countries).

The Israeli arena differs from the Western one in one significant respect. The Israeli media has only started to cover the climate crisis in recent years, initially solely in the context of major international conferences and natural disasters, and currently at a slightly broader scope. However, we seem to have skipped over a highly problematic stage of dealing with the crisis: arguments about its actual existence and who the responsible entities are, and treating climate deniers as legitimate political players. These are central issues Western coverage of the crisis has dealt with over the years, yet they are practically absent from the Israeli landscape. It is as if we have skipped over these difficult preceding steps and jumped straight to a reality in which the number of climate deniers and sceptics is progressively diminishing and their voices are now barely heard in the media.

Based on the understanding that without significant political involvement nothing will change, and that without the public’s involvement decision makers will not change their priorities, climate journalists and columnists seek to ensure the climate crisis does not fall off the news agenda. Regrettably, they have to cope with editors who, not sharing this worldview, make stringent approval conditions for investigative climate stories and news items. Furthermore, they do not allocate resources that would encourage better journalism, reinforcing relegation of the crisis to the environmental niche, and they fail to support and backup their reporters, who are exposed to threats and pressure from powerful elements. Without a major change of approach on the part of news editors in most Israeli media, we will have to make do with isolated oases of brave, professional, and groundbreaking journalism. Without the necessary changes, we will continue to witness this important and highly influential social institution fail to contribute in the fight against one of the greatest crises the world has ever known.

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1. A reference to Israel’s current right-wing prime minister, Naftali Bennett. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Left-wing Meretz is considered to be Israel’s most eco-friendly political party. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ha’aretz*, *The Marker*, and *Globes* are among Israel’s leading newspapers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)