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Climate Change and the Media

In this chapter, we will explore the intricate relationship between climate change and the media, delving into how media coverage shapes public perception and understanding of climate change, while also examining the environmental impact of media technologies themselves. As the climate crisis deepens, the media's role in informing, educating and mobilising public opinion has never been more critical. Yet the production and consumption of media, which we will exemplify through the games industry, contribute to the very environmental issues they report on. Through a balanced analysis of media narratives, digital innovations and industry practices, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the media's dual role in both influencing and responding to the climate change challenge. We will explore the complexities of media coverage, the potential of digital media to foster climate awareness, the environmental footprint of media technologies, and what can be done to mitigate their impact, considering how media can pave the way towards a more sustainable future.

Learning Objectives

- Recognise the media's influence on public perception of climate change and its own environmental impact, particularly through the example of the games industry.
- Evaluate how media narratives shape public understanding of climate change and the potential of digital media to foster climate awareness.
- Understand the environmental consequences of media production and consumption and strategies to mitigate these impacts.
- Identify how the media can contribute to a more sustainable future by promoting environmental awareness and fostering societal change towards sustainability.

Introduction

Climate change is a global issue that is commonly recognised as one of the greatest challenges and crises facing humanity today. The **climate crisis** refers to the threat facing our

planet due to climate change, impacting on all facets of the natural world and human society. The climate crisis is characterised by a series of interconnected and escalating environmental challenges. These challenges include, but are not limited to, rising global temperatures, melting ice caps and glaciers, increasing sea levels, and more frequent and severe weather events such as hurricanes, floods, droughts and wildfires. These changes are primarily driven by human activities, particularly the emission of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄) from burning fossil fuels, deforestation and industrial processes globally.

The climate crisis is not only an environmental issue but also a complex **socioeconomic** challenge that worsens existing inequalities and affects the most vulnerable populations in the world. The crisis threatens food and water security, public health, economic stability and the very fabric of societies around the world. Addressing the climate crisis requires urgent and concerted efforts at all levels of governance and society, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions, enhancing climate resilience and adaptation strategies, and transitioning to sustainable and equitable economic models. Importantly for our purposes, the crisis also requires robust, honest and informative coverage from all aspects of contemporary media.

The impacts of climate change are among the most serious for life on Earth and there is an urgent need for comprehensive and integrated strategies to mitigate its effects and adapt to its consequences. Climate change poses significant risks to global health, exacerbating conditions ranging from respiratory and heat-related illnesses to vector-borne diseases. For example, a study by Olson and Metz (2020) emphasises the acute risks faced by pregnant mothers, fetuses and children, underlining the climate crisis as a health threat multiplier, particularly for vulnerable populations. The degradation of environmental and ecosystem services further complicates these health challenges, demanding immediate action to safeguard public health (Olson and Metz, 2020).

The psychological impacts of the climate crisis are also profound, with increased risks of anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. There is a critical role for education in addressing these challenges through various strategies, including improving climate science education, and fostering resilience (Sinatra, 2022). This will also require an appropriate response from the media. The climate crisis exacerbates existing socioeconomic inequalities, disproportionately affecting the world's most vulnerable populations. Efforts to mitigate climate change must therefore prioritise equity and justice, ensuring that adaptation and mitigation strategies are accessible to all, particularly those in developing countries and marginalised communities. This requires an approach that integrates social, economic and environmental objectives and the media will play a key role in this response (Wu et al., 2016).

Addressing the climate crisis requires robust policy and governance frameworks that can facilitate the transition to low-carbon economies, promote sustainable development and protect ecosystems. Research calls for an integration of climate change considerations into all levels of decision-making, from local to global, and for the engagement of all sectors of society in crafting and implementing responses (McHugh et al., 2021). Again, such a call requires the media to play a role in engaging and informing global publics effectively and honestly. Mitigating the climate crisis will require technological innovations, such as renewable energy sources and carbon capture and storage. This will also need significant behavioural changes at the individual and collective levels. Strategies include reducing

energy consumption, shifting to sustainable transportation modes and adopting more environmentally friendly consumption patterns. These changes are crucial for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and limiting global warming to the targets set by international agreements such as the **Paris Agreement** (Fawzy et al., 2020).



Figure 15.1 Climate Change protests in London

Source: Julian Stallabrass, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:London_Climate_Strike_JPS_8792a-sm_%2848765254346%29.jpg

The climate crisis is a complex and urgent issue that requires a **multidisciplinary approach**, encompassing scientific research, policy innovation, technological development, societal transformation, and an appropriate media response to informing and educating. The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and understanding of this complex issue, serving as the primary conduit through which scientific research, policy debates and the human dimensions of climate change are communicated to the broader public. The interaction between climate science and media coverage is crucial for enhancing public engagement and fostering a more informed and responsive society.

Thankfully, it has been found that the media can play a positive role in the climate crisis. Local media outlets, through engagement with local academics, can significantly increase public engagement on climate change. This also suggests a need for scientists to build trusted relationships with media professionals to increase the local salience of climate issues (Howarth and Anderson, 2019). However, as we have seen throughout this book, digital and social media have become the critical platforms for communication, including climate change communication. It is these platforms which are now shaping the way stakeholders, including scientists and the public, interact and mobilise support for climate action (Schäfer, 2012).

This is the core of many of the issues that the media has with engaging with the climate crisis in a manner that can address the issues that it poses. The relationship between climate change and the media is underpinned by the importance of accurate, compelling and accessible communication in mobilising societal responses to this global challenge. While effective media communication can bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and public understanding, facilitating a more informed and proactive approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation, this is not a uniform aspect of how the media has engaged with the climate crisis.

Media Coverage of Climate Change

It is important to understand that **climate communication** is a critical dimension of climate action, shaping cultural understandings and societal responses to climate change (Carvalho, et al., 2021). Media communication, including TV, radio, newspapers and the internet which are all now facets of digital media, is a vital source for people's awareness and knowledge about **anthropogenic** (shaped and caused by human beings) climate change, shaping public perception through various frames of mediated communication (Schäfer, 2018). As such, the media is pivotal to any response to the climate crisis. The media plays a critical role in informing the public about the realities of climate change.

In developing countries like India, media coverage is essential for increasing public engagement among unaware populations. It has been found that the Indian media, through consistent and accurate coverage, can positively influence science-based climate beliefs, risk perceptions and policy support (Thaker et al., 2017). The framing of climate change by the media significantly impacts public perception of the crisis. For example, television news channels in India, such as NDTV 24x7 and CNNIBN, have been found to have a major role in public understanding of the crisis based on their coverage of climate change stories. This highlights the significant role of the media in disseminating scientific information and acting as a catalyst in creating awareness (Aram and Nivas, 2015). However, the narratives on climate change can vary, demonstrating the media's power in framing climate change either as a catastrophic impact or as an opportunity for economic transition. Depending on factors such as the ownership of the media company, the ideological stance of the controlling interests in the company and the biases of numerous parties involved, that message could be informative or one of denial regarding the potential impact of climate change.

In most cases, the media facilitates public discourse by providing a platform for debate and presenting diverse perspectives. However, in the case of climate change there is little to debate in terms of perspective. Scientists are in unanimous agreement on climate change, with regards to the causes and the effects. However, it is true that the cognitive frames of climate journalists – which vary from attributing responsibility for climate change to varied factors – influence media debates and public opinion (Engesser and Brüggemann, 2016). While in many fields this diversity of viewpoints encourages a more nuanced understanding among the public, in the case of climate change a more problematic effect is observed. Alternatives to the narrative of the climate crisis may contribute to **climate change scepticism**.

A meta-analysis of research on climate journalism by Schäfer and Painter (2020) shows that the landscape of climate journalism is undergoing significant transformations. This research