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978-0-521-11584-1 - Who Speaks for the Climate?: Making Sense of Media Reporting on Climate Change

Maxwell T. Boykoff

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Who Speaks for the Climate?

The public rely upon media representations to help interpret and make sense of the many complexities relating to climate science and governance. Media representations of climate issues – from news to entertainment – are powerful and important links between people’s everyday realities and experiences, and the ways in which they are discussed by scientists, policymakers and public actors. A dynamic mix of influences shapes what becomes climate ‘news’ or ‘information’. From internal workings of mass media such as journalistic norms, to external political, economic, cultural and social factors, this book helps students, academic researchers and interested members of the public explore how the media portrays influence. Providing a bridge between academic considerations and real-world developments, this book makes sense of media reporting on climate change as it explores ‘who speaks for the climate’ and what effects this may have on the spectrum of possible responses to modern climate challenges.

Maxwell T. Boykoff is an assistant professor in the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences’s Center for Science and Technology Policy Research at the University of Colorado Boulder. He teaches in the Environmental Studies Program and is Adjunct Faculty in the Geography Department. In addition, he is a senior visiting research associate in the Environmental Change Institute at the University of Oxford. Max has ongoing interests in climate adaptation, cultural politics and environmental governance, science–policy interactions, and political economy and the environment. His research has been mentioned in a range of outlets such as *Science*, *Nature*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Grist*, *Utne Reader*, *La Rázon* (Spain) and (US) National Public Radio.

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*I dedicate this book to the memory of Stephen H. Schneider
(1945–2010).*

I also dedicate this to my sons Elijah and Calvin.

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Preface

It is my hope that this volume inspires ongoing thinking and research that interrogates *why* and *how* media representations of climate change are produced, negotiated and disseminated through unequal power and inequalities of access and resources. In so doing, I hope my work will expand the spectrum of possibility for enhanced decision-making and action on climate change.

This book has been an opportunity to weave a coherent narrative through quantitative and qualitative work that I have produced on the subject of media and climate change over the last decade or so. In particular, Chapter 1 derives from cooperative work that I have undertaken with Michael K. Goodman and Ian Curtis on ‘the cultural politics of climate change’. Chapters 5 and 6 draw from collaborations with Jules Boykoff on US newspaper coverage of climate change, and with Maria Mansfield on tabloid coverage in the UK. Parts of Chapters 7 and 8 draw on materials once assembled with J. Timmons Roberts as well as with S. Ravi Rajan, while considerations of new and social media in Chapter 8 stem from ongoing discussions with Saffron O'Neill. In addition, close readers will certainly detect the imprints of many scholars, mentors and friends who have influenced my considerations in the volume you now hold.

The perspective in this book derives from my interdisciplinary path through both formal and informal academic commitments and pursuits. I have been heavily influenced by exposure and formal as well as informal training in intersecting disciplines such as Environmental Studies, Geography, Sociology, Psychology, Politics, Chemistry, Physics and the History of Consciousness.

I am not a trained journalist. The observations and arguments that I put forward come from many interviews with those inside the profession, analyses of the content of media representations, and interrogations of how these communities relate to science, policy and the public. Yet, these explorations remain from the standpoint of a

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scholar outside the quotidian practices of journalism. Moreover, I am from the United States. This influences how the book has approached the material from a Western perspective, with many examples and illustrations emanating from the United States and Western Europe.

Media representations of climate change and other environmental issues are areas of burgeoning research. In this volume, I have been tempted to extensively catalogue this work. However, doing so would quickly expand this book to twice the size it is now. Therefore, I have had to be very economizing with the research I have mentioned here.

In addition, I have not been able to satisfyingly address all of the many dimensions and intersections between this topic and themes such as media and democracy, as well as media and political ecology. While it has been necessarily beyond the scope of the book to take up such themes comprehensively, it is my intention that this volume can be read usefully with these other literatures.

These days, a great deal of interesting and innovative research seems to be coming from undergraduate, masters and PhD students around the world. Many researchers have contacted me over the years and shared their insights, approaches, findings and conclusions. Some of the innovative thinking may be attributed to the new generation of new media consumers as well as those who have grown up in a time when climate change was already evident on the public agenda. I worry a bit that much of these contributions haven't yet made it into the formal peer-reviewed literature, and instead remain confined to their respective department and campus library archives, or on a family bookshelf. However, there is a lot that can be gained from these contributions: methodologically, empirically, theoretically. So I do hope that my work here will inspire all its readers (you!) to continue to take up these vexing yet vital twenty-first century questions.

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My grandfather, Alvin ‘the silent swimmer’ Schoenbeck, roots this scholarship. He worked in the stock room for the *Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel* for over fifty years, and his mantra of ‘Work, Study, Play, Relax’ has kept me thinking and reflecting over time.

My brother Jules Boykoff deserves recognition for the co-creation and initial research on this project. While accompanying me on a fieldwork expedition many years ago, this project was concocted together in the waters off the North Coast of Honduras. I admire his ongoing work as a true public intellectual, and appreciate his critically important research on social movements and the suppression of dissent.

I have Ami Nacu-Schmidt at the University of Colorado Boulder and Debs Strickland at the University of Oxford to thank for their work on the figures found in this volume. Ami also deserves credit for her help in formatting the book, as well as for the cover design. I also thank Sarah Erskine for her help with data collection in the later stages of the assembly of this book manuscript.

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