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Uncovering a Climate Catastrophe? Media Coverage of Australia's Black Summer Bushfires and the Revelatory Extent of the Climate Blame Frame

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Abstract

The Black Summer of 2019/2020 saw the forests of southeast Australia go up in flames. The fire season started early, in September 2019, and by March 2020 fires had burned over 12.6 million hectares (Werner and Lyons). The scale and severity of the fires was quickly confirmed by scientists to be "unprecedented globally" (Boer et al.) and attributable to climate change (Nolan et al.).

The fires were also a media spectacle, generating months of apocalyptic front-page images and harrowing broadcast footage. Media coverage was particularly preoccupied by the *cause* of the fires. Media framing of disasters often seeks to attribute blame (Anderson et al.; Ewart and McLean) and, over the course of the fire period, blame for the fires was attributed to climate change in much media coverage. However, as the disaster unfolded, denialist discourses in some media outlets sought to veil this revelation by providing alternative explanations for the fires. Misinformation originating from social media also contributed to this obscuration.

In this article, we investigate the extent to which media coverage of the 2019/2020 bushfires functioned both to precipitate a climate change epiphany and also to support refutation of the connection between catastrophic fires and the climate crisis.

Environmental Communication and Revelation

In its biblical sense, revelation is both an ending and an opening: it is the apocalyptic end-time and also the "revealing" of this time through stories and images. Environmental communication has always been revelatory, in these dual senses of the word – it is a mode of communication that is tightly bound to crisis; that has long grappled with obfuscation and misinformation; and that disrupts power structures and notions of the status quo as it seeks to reveal what is hidden. Climate change in particular is associated in the popular imagination with apocalypse, and is also a reality that is constantly being "revealed". Indeed, the narrative of climate change has been "animated by the revelations of science" (McNeish 1045) and presented to the public through "key moments of disclosure and revelation", or "signal moments", such as scientist James Hansen's 1988 US Senate testimony on global warming (Hamblin 224).

Journalism is "at the frontline of environmental communication" (Parham 96) and environmental news, too, is often revelatory in nature – it exposes the problems inherent in the human relationship with the natural world, and it reveals the scientific evidence behind contentious issues such as climate change. Like other environmental communicators, environmental journalists seek to "break through the perceptual paralysis" (Nisbet 44) surrounding climate change, with the dual aim of better informing the public and instigating policy change. Yet leading environmental commentators continually call for "better media coverage" of the planetary crisis (Suzuki), as climate change is repeatedly bumped off the news agenda by stories and events deemed more newsworthy.

News coverage of climate-related disasters is often revelatory both in tone and in cultural function. The disasters themselves and the news narratives which communicate them become processes that make visible what is hidden. Because environmental news is "event driven" (Hansen 95), disasters receive far more news coverage than ongoing problems and trends such as climate change itself, or more quietly devastating issues such as species extinction or climate migration. Disasters are also highly visual in nature. Trumbo (269) describes climate change as an issue that is urgent, global in scale, and yet "practically invisible"; in this sense, climate-related disasters become a means of visualising and realising what is otherwise a complex, difficult, abstract, and un-seeable concept.

Unsurprisingly, natural disasters are often presented to the public through a film of apocalyptic rhetoric and imagery. Yet natural disasters can be also "revelatory" moments: instances of awakening in which suppressed truths come spectacularly and devastatingly to the surface. Matthewman (9–10) argues that "disasters afford us insights into social reality that ordinarily pass unnoticed. As such, they can be read as modes of disclosure, forms of communication". Disasters, he continues, can reveal both "our new normal" and "our general existential condition", bringing "the underbelly of progress into sharp relief". Similarly, Lukes (1) states that disasters "lift veils", revealing "what is hidden from view in normal times". Yet for Lukes, "the revelation tells us nothing new, nothing that we did not already know", and is instead a forced confronting of that which is known yet difficult to engage with. Lukes' concern is the "revealing" of poverty and inequality in New Orleans following the impact of Hurricane Katrina, yet climate-related disasters can also make visible what McNeish terms "the dark side effects of industrial civilisation" (1047).

The Australian bushfires of 2019/2020 can be read in these terms, primarily because they unveiled the connection between climate change and extreme events. Scorching millions of hectares, with a devastating impact on human and non-human communities, the fires revealed climate change as a physical reality, and—for Australians—as a local issue as well as a global one. As media coverage of the fires unfolded and smoke settled on half the country, the impact of climate change on individual lives, communities, landscapes, native animal and plant species, and well-established cultural practices (such as the summer camping holiday) could be fully and dramatically realised. Even for those Australians not immediately impacted, the effects were lived and felt: in our lungs, and on our skin, a physical revelation that the impacts of climate change are not limited to geographically distant people or as-yet-unborn future generations. For many of us, the summer of fire was a realisation that climate change can no longer be held at arm's length.

"Revelation" also involves a temporal collapse whereby the future is dragged into the present. A revelatory streak of this nature has always existed at the heart of environmental communication and can be traced back at least as far as the environmentalist Rachel Carson, whose 1962 book *Silent Spring* revealed a bleak, apocalyptic future devoid of wildlife and birdsong. In other words, environmental communication can inspire action for change by exposing the ways in which the comforts and securities of the present are built upon a refusal to engage with the future. This temporal rupture where the future meets the present is particularly characteristic of climate change narratives. It is not surprising, then, that media coverage of the 2019/2020 bushfires addressed not just the immediate loss and devastation but also dread of the future, and the understanding that summer will increasingly hold such threats.

Bushfires, Climate Change and the Media

The link between bushfire risk and climate change generated a flurry of coverage in the Australian media well before the fires started in the spring of 2019. In April that year, a coalition of 23 former fire and emergency services leaders warned that Australia was "unprepared for an escalating climate threat" (Cox). They requested a meeting with the new government, to be elected in May, and better funding for firefighting to face the coming bushfire season. When that meeting was granted, at the end of Australia's hottest and driest year on record (Doyle) in November 2019, bushfires had already been burning for two months. As the fires burned, the emergency leaders expressed frustration that their warnings had been ignored, claiming they had been "gagged" because "you are not allowed to talk about climate change". They cited climate change as the key reason why the fire season was lengthening and fires were harder to fight. "If it's not time now to speak about climate and what's driving these events?", they asked, "– when?" (McCubbing).

The mediated uncovering of a bushfire/climate change connection was not strictly a revelation. Recent fires in California, Russia, the Amazon, Greece, and Sweden have all been reported in the media as having been exacerbated by climate change. Australia, however, has long regarded itself as a "fire continent": a place adapted to fire, whose landscapes invite fire and can recover from it. Bushfires had therefore been considered part of the Australian "normal". But in the Australian spring of 2019, with fires having started earlier than ever and charring rainforests that did not usually burn, the fire chiefs' warning of a climate change-induced catastrophic bushfire season seemed prescient. As the fires spread and merged, taking homes, lives, landscapes, and driving people towards the water, revelatory images emerged in the media. Pictures of fire refugees fleeing under dystopian crimson skies, masked against the smoke, were accompanied by headlines like "Apocalypse Now" (Fife-Yeomans) and "Escaping Hell" (*The Independent*). Reports used words like "terror", "nightmare" (Smee), "mayhem", and "Armageddon" (Davidson).

In the Australian media, the fire/climate change connection quickly became politicised. The Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack interviewed by the ABC, responding to a comment by Greens leader Adam Bandt, said connecting bushfire and climate while the fires raged was "disgraceful" and "disgusting". People needed help, he said, not "the ravings of some pure enlightened and woke capital city greenies" (Golubeva and Haydar). Gladys Berejiklian the NSW Premier also described it as "inappropriate" (Baker) and "disappointing" (Fox and Higgins) to talk about climate change at this time. However Carol Sparks, Mayor of bushfire-ravaged Glen Innes in rural NSW, contradicted this stance, telling the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) "Michael McCormack needs to read the science". Climate change, she said, was "not a political thing" but "scientific fact" (Golubeva and Haydar).

As the fires merged and intensified, so did the media firestorm. Key Australian media became a sparring ground for issue definition, with media predictably split down ideological lines. Public broadcasters the ABC and SBS (Special Broadcasting Service), along with *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Guardian Australia*, predominantly framed the catastrophe as wrought by climate change. *The Guardian*, in an in-depth investigation of climate science and bushfire risk, stated that "despite the political smokescreen" the connection between the fires and global warming was "unequivocal" (Redfern). The ABC characterised the fires as "a glimpse of the horrors of climate change's crescendoing impact" (Rose). News outlets owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp Australia, however, actively sought to play down the fires' seriousness. On 2 January, as front pages of newspapers across the world revealed horrifying fiery images, Murdoch's *Australian* ran an upbeat shot of New Year's Day picnic races as its lead, relegating discussion of the fires to page 4 (Meade). More than simply obscuring the fires' significance, News Corp media actively sought to convince readers that the fires were not out of the ordinary. For example, as the fires' magnitude was becoming clear on the last day of 2019, *The Australian* ran a piece comparing the fires with previous conflagrations, claiming such conditions were "not unprecedented" and the fires were "nothing new" (Johnstone). News Corp's Sky News also used this frame: "climate alarmists", "catastrophise", and "don't want to look at history", it stated in a segment comparing the event to past major bushfires (Kenny).

As the fires continued into January and February 2020, the refutation of the climate change frame solidified around several themes. Conservative media continued to insist the fires were "normal" for Australia and attributed their severity to a lack of hazard reduction burning, which they blamed on "Greens policies" (Brown and

Caisley). They also promoted the argument, espoused by Energy Minister Angus Taylor, that with only “1.3% of global emissions” Australia “could not have meaningful impact” on global warming through emissions reductions, and that top-down climate mitigation pressure from the UN was “doomed to fail” (Lloyd).

Foreign media saw the fires in quite different terms. From the outside looking in, the Australian fires were clearly revealed as fuelled by global heating and exacerbated by the Australian government’s climate denialism. Australia was framed as a “notorious climate offender” (Shield) that was—as *The New York Times* put it—“committing climate suicide” (Flanagan) with its lack of coherent climate policy and its predilection for mining coal. *Ouest-France* ran a headline reading “High on carbon, rich Australia denies global warming” in which it called Scott Morrison’s position on climate change “incomprehensible” (Guibert). The *LA Times* called the Australian fires “a climate change warning to its leaders—and ours”, noting how “fossil fuel friendly Morrison” had “gleefully wielded a fist-sized chunk of coal on the floor of parliament in 2017” (Karlik). In the UK, the *Independent* online ran a front page spread of the fires’ vast smoke plume, with the headline “This is what a climate crisis looks like” (*Independent Online*), while Australian MP Craig Kelly was called “disgraceful” by an interviewer on Good Morning Britain for denying the fires’ link to climate change (Good Morning Britain).

Both in Australia and internationally, deliberate misinformation spread by social media additionally shaped media discourse on the fires. The false revelation that the fires had predominantly been started by arson spread on Twitter under the hashtag #ArsonEmergency. While research has been quick to show that this hashtag was artificially promoted by bots (Weber et al.), this and misinformation like it was also shared and amplified by real Twitter users, and quickly spread into mainstream media in Australia—including Murdoch’s *Australian* (Ross and Reid)—and internationally. Such misinformation was used to shore up denialist discourses about the fires, and to obscure revelation of the fire/climate change connection.

Blame Framing, Public Opinion and the Extent of the Climate Change Revelation

As studies of media coverage of environmental disasters show us, media seek to apportion blame. This blame framing is “accountability work”, undertaken to explain how and why a disaster occurred, with the aim of “scrutinizing the actions of crisis actors, and holding responsible authorities to account” (Anderson et al. 930). In moments of disaster and in their aftermath, “framing contests” (Benford and Snow) can emerge in which some actors, regarding the crisis as an opportunity for change, highlight the systemic issues that have led to the crisis. Other actors, experiencing the crisis as a threat to the status quo, try to attribute the blame to others, and deny the need for policy change. As the Black Summer unfolded, just such a contest took place in Australian media discourse. While Murdoch’s dominant News Corp media sought to protect the status quo, promote conservative politicians’ views, and divert attention from the climate crisis, other Australian and overseas media outlets revealed the fires’ link to climate change and intransigent emissions policy. However, cracks did begin to show in the News Corp stance on climate change during the fires: an internal whistleblower publicly resigned over the media company’s fires coverage, calling it a “misinformation campaign”, and James Murdoch also spoke out about being “disappointed with the ongoing denial of the role of climate change” in reporting the fires (ABC/Reuters).

Although media reporting on the environment has long been at the forefront of shaping social understanding of environmental issues, and news maintains a central role in both revealing environmental threats and shaping environmental politics (Lester), during Australia’s Black Summer people were also learning about the fires from lived experience. Polls show that the fires affected 57% of Australians. Even those distant from the catastrophe were, for some time, breathing the most toxic air in the world. This *personal experience* of disaster revealed a bushfire season that was far outside the normal, and public opinion reflected this. A YouGov Australia Institute poll in January 2020 found that 79% of Australians were concerned about climate change—an increase of 5% from July 2019—and 67% believed climate change was making the bushfires worse (Australia Institute). However, a January 2020 Ipsos poll also found that polarisation along political lines on whether climate change was indeed occurring had increased since 2018, and was at its highest levels since 2014 (Crowe). This may reflect the kind of polarised media landscape that was evident during the fires.

A thorough dissection in public discourse of Australia’s unprecedented fire season has been largely eclipsed by the vast coverage of the coronavirus pandemic that so quickly followed it. In May 2020, however, the fires were back in the media, when the Bushfires Royal Commission found that the Black Summer “played out exactly as scientists predicted it would” and that more seasons like it were now “locked in” because of carbon emissions (Hitch). It now remains to be seen whether the revelatory extent of the climate change blame frame that played out in media discourse on the fires will be sufficient to garner meaningful action and policy change—or whether denialist discourses will again obscure climate change revelation and seek to maintain the status quo.

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