



## The coronavirus as tipping point: communicating environmental crisis in a time of pandemic

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Abstract:	This essay examines media and environment during the pandemic through the conceptual lens of environmental communication. We take the pulse of environmental communication under COVID-19, noting that while the quantity of media coverage on key environmental issues has fallen during the blanket coverage of the pandemic, COVID-19 has acted on multiple levels as a moment of discursive change in environmental communication. We contend that mediated discourse on the environment during the pandemic has offered new insights, and an opportunity for a reset in environmental understandings, including a new consciousness of global connectedness in environmental responsibility, and an opportunity to improve publics' environmental literacy. *** This essay is intended for the extraordinary issue, on Coronavirus, Crisis and Communication ***

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## Submission for MIA extraordinary issue: Coronavirus, Crisis and Communication

### *The coronavirus as tipping point: communicating environmental crisis in a time of pandemic*

Times of crisis can be moments of fear, in which the future becomes threatening and unknown. Moments of crisis can also be points of inflection: instructive opportunities to rethink old ways of behaving, to pause, re-evaluate, and choose new paths. In this essay, we conceptualise the coronavirus pandemic as such a point of inflection in mediatised discourse on the environment. We briefly examine here a range of **mainly** Australian media coverage of environmental issues during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we identify some of the key distinguishing framings of media reporting on the environment during this time.

We examine media and environment during the pandemic through the conceptual lens of environmental communication, which like conservation biology, regards itself a “crisis discipline” (Cox, 2007: 4), being fundamentally involved with the revealing and addressing of environmental harms. Environmental communication, as a field of study and practice, invites dialogue about threats to nature and considers as its key normative tenet an obligation to enhance “the ability of society to respond appropriately to environmental signals relevant to the wellbeing of both human civilization and natural biological systems” (ibid.).

In this essay, we take the pulse of environmental communication under COVID-19. We note that while the quantity of media coverage on key environmental issues, such as climate change, may have fallen during the blanket coverage of the pandemic itself, COVID-19 has acted on multiple levels as a pivotal moment of discursive change in environmental communication. We contend that mediatised discourse on the environment during the pandemic has offered new insights, and an opportunity for a reset in environmental understandings, including a new consciousness of global connectedness in environmental responsibility, and an opportunity to improve publics’ environmental literacy.

### **Media and environment through the pandemic**

Coronavirus has been a media spectacle. The vast, agenda setting media coverage of the pandemic has lasted for months, occupying more mediatised space and generating more social concern and panic (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2020) than perhaps any global event since the World Wars. This unwavering focus on the pandemic has eclipsed coverage of other issues. Early analysis shows that media attention to climate change dropped dramatically during the **early months of the** pandemic. A global monitoring project that tracks media coverage of climate change found reporting on this issue down 59% from January to April 2020 (MeCCO, 2020). In Australia specifically, reporting on climate change fell to less than 1% of media content in March and April 2020, while 80% of articles mentioned coronavirus by the end of March 2020 (Hannam, 2020). In the environment coverage that persisted, however, there seem to have been some qualitative changes, and new, consistent framings have emerged.

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4 One prominent frame in mediatised environmental discourse has been attribution of the  
5 pandemic to human incursions into nature, and a realisation that we are not separate from  
6 nature, but dependent on it. “Nature is sending us a message,” was how several Australian media  
7 framed this notion. *The Guardian* quoted the UN’s environment chief, Inger Anderson as saying:  
8 “We are intimately interconnected with nature, whether we like it or not. If we don’t take care  
9 of nature, we can’t take care of ourselves” (Carrington, 2020). The *ABC* similarly reported that  
10 “global disregard for nature” (Diprose & Neal, 2020) had brought about the pandemic, while the  
11 *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote of the “perfect storm” for pandemics created by the global illegal  
12 wildlife trade (Groch, 2020). “We did it to ourselves” *The Guardian* reported a prominent US  
13 biologist as saying. “To stop future pandemics”, it wrote “we need more respect for the natural  
14 world” (Weston, 2020).  
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19 Media also reported on the environment under coronavirus by emphasising the beneficial effects  
20 of global lockdown on air pollution, and the reclaiming of human spaces by animals. This was a  
21 global theme, reflected in images of dramatically clean skies and waters in usually crowded,  
22 polluted cities, and wild animals seen in urban settings. The BBC posted a video, for example, a  
23 kangaroo hopping through downtown Adelaide.  
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26 Media discourse additionally coalesced around a frame of “listening to science”. As politicians  
27 deferred to epidemiologists, payed utmost attention to their daily reports of R numbers, and  
28 acted decisively on their disease transmission modelling, some in the media began to link this  
29 reliance on science with longstanding government dismissal of climate science. “Australia  
30 listened to the experts on coronavirus. It’s time we heard them on climate change” wrote  
31 *Guardian* editor, Lenore Taylor, for example. The pandemic showed that “good decisions are  
32 made” when the government considers “the evidence and the best available expert advice” she  
33 wrote, showing that “a different kind of politics” was possible (Taylor, 2020).  
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37 Importantly, the pandemic lockdown was also discussed in terms of its capacity to both  
38 temporarily and, perhaps permanently, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stimulate change.  
39 The *SBS* described “the largest-ever reduction of energy demand and CO2 emissions”. While in  
40 the context of deaths and economic trauma this was “nothing to celebrate”, it could “point the  
41 way to structural change”, making the crisis “a genuine turning point for world energy markets”  
42 the *SBS* reported (AFP/SBS, 2020). Once the pandemic seemingly reached its (first) peak in  
43 Australia, and the initial ‘curve’ had been flattened, there were calls to flatten the (infinitely more  
44 threatening) ‘climate change curve’ with a renewables-led economic recovery. That the  
45 coronavirus could act as a point of inflection in the fight against climate change was reflected  
46 substantially in media discourse. An article in *The Conversation*, for example, called the pandemic  
47 a “sliding doors moment” and a “fork in the road” at which we could “change Earth’s trajectory”  
48 (Canadell et al., 2020).  
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53 While mainstream media turned at least some of its attention to communicating environmental  
54 messages during the early days of the pandemic, social media became a site for the spread of  
55 human-focused health misinformation and conspiracy theories. In social media discourse there  
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3 were claims of miracle cures, and attributions of the virus' origins variously to a bio-weapon, 5G  
4 networks, and the world-dominating plans of vaccine advocates. Australian mainstream media  
5 debunked some of these false claims (Bogle 2020). Several stories that spread globally on social  
6 networks did relate to the return of animals while humans were in lockdown – one, for example,  
7 purporting to show dolphins swimming in Venice's canals, a claim since debunked (Daly 2020). In  
8 explanation of such social media content, US psychology Professor Sue Clayton has commented  
9 that "people really want to believe in the power of nature to recover. People hope that, no  
10 matter what we've done, nature is powerful enough to rise above it" (quoted in *ibid.*). Such  
11 'fake news' social media posts are harmful precisely because they spread false hope. However,  
12 it might also be argued that despite their untruths, such viral fakes indicate that the new  
13 appreciation for nature seen in mainstream media during the early months of the pandemic  
14 spread to social media also.  
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19 One aspect of environmental communication in the midst of the pandemic was notable for its  
20 relative *absence*. Without the ability to hold physical protests under lockdown, environmental  
21 activism became much less visible in mainstream media. Climate advocacy groups such as  
22 Extinction Rebellion have built their communication strategies on the physical act of flooding  
23 public space with visual and verbal messages, signalling a sense of emergency and crisis. Isolation  
24 across the globe has shifted action by groups like Extinction Rebellion and Fridays For Future into  
25 a fully online space. Although this has enabled grassroots environmental communication to  
26 continue, it has diminished these groups' ability to seize and hold the gaze of the mainstream  
27 news audience. Extinction Rebellion was reported in Australian media to be planning "digital  
28 disruption" under lockdown. "We're still watching the government and we'll still hold them to  
29 account," the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the group's spokesperson as saying (Fitzsimmons,  
30 2020).  
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### 35 **Writing environmental concerns into "the new normal"**

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37 In many ways, environmental communication during the pandemic highlights the importance and  
38 urgency of environmental literacy, by demonstrating the need for a better understanding of the  
39 human/nature relationship and the consequences of human incursions into nature. Environmental  
40 literacy incorporates the knowledge and competencies that empower individuals  
41 and communities to act, live, and encourage policy action in ways that enable environmental  
42 sustainability and reduce planetary harm. Media commentary linking COVID-19 to problems  
43 inherent in the human/nature relationship ensures that environmental sustainability as "a vision  
44 of achieving human and eco-system well-being *together*" (Washington, 2015: 2) has quickly  
45 moved from the margins to the centre of media discourse: where it remains, as we begin to  
46 consider our emergence into a post-pandemic world. Media frequently noted during the  
47 pandemic that we are "all in this together" (7News, 2020). Such statements highlight global  
48 interconnectedness and responsibility in terms of the pandemic, and they likewise underscore  
49 the nature of global *environmental* impacts and responsibilities.  
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54 **Additionally**, while the pandemic may have largely shifted media (and public) attention onto  
55 *human* (rather than planetary) suffering and wellbeing, and onto the needs of present rather  
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3 than future generations, there are close parallels to be drawn between the two crises. In research  
4 commissioned by European Climate Foundation, the charity group Climate Outreach reported  
5 that “Covid-19 can feel like a sped up analogy for climate change” because “Both are major health  
6 challenges, presenting a global threat to wellbeing in which the vulnerable are hit first and  
7 hardest, and personal and local action play a crucial role” (Webster et al., 2020: 7).  
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10 Environmental communicators have seized upon these links between the two crises in order to  
11 maintain the momentum of concern for planetary health. For example, in a call for continued  
12 “rebellion” against government and industry during the pandemic, Clare Farrell, co-founder of  
13 Extinction Rebellion, **stated** “Health, environment, inequality, planetary stability – it’s all  
14 connected, and as a global family, so are we” (2020). Meanwhile Christiana Figueres, former head  
15 of the UN Climate Change Convention and architect of the Paris Agreement, has **said** that “The  
16 Covid-19 pandemic has unleashed humanity’s instinct to transform itself in the face of a universal  
17 threat and it can help us do the same to create a livable planet for future generations” (Carbon  
18 Brief, 2020). Jennifer Morgan, Executive Director of Greenpeace, has described the pandemic as  
19 a chance for “reset” and called for “a just and climate-safe world, because environmental health  
20 and our own well-being are dependent on each other” (Greenpeace International, 2020).  
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25 It has been argued that humans have a limited capacity to be worried about multiple problems  
26 at the same time: a “finite pool of worry” (Weber, 2006). Yet interestingly, while there has been  
27 a drop in news coverage of climate and environmental crisis during the pandemic, public concern  
28 about climate change has not necessarily declined (Schwartz, 2020). A poll conducted in April  
29 2020 found widespread global support for “government actions to prioritise climate change in  
30 the economic recovery after COVID-19” (IPSOS, 2020). This suggests that far from experiencing  
31 “worry fatigue”, and despite the trauma and suffering caused by the pandemic, audiences and  
32 publics may well be in a state of hyper-awareness, openness to emergency, and readiness to  
33 respond. The upswelling of public support for the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of  
34 George Floyd’s death, and while still in the pandemic’s grip, demonstrates that one “worry” does  
35 not simply displace others, especially when these combined “worries” shine a light on the same  
36 deeply ingrained problems of injustice, inequality, and the uneven distribution of suffering -  
37 including suffering wrought by environmental harms.  
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42 **Media reporting on climate and the environmental crisis may have contracted in quantity during**  
43 **the pandemic, as individuals, communities, and governments dealt with more immediately**  
44 **pressing concerns relating to health, human suffering and economic woes. While acknowledging**  
45 **this drop in quantity, our paper has explored the shifts and changes in the *quality* of**  
46 **environmental communication during the COVID-19 crisis. Arguably, we can conceive of the**  
47 **pandemic not just as a distraction from the environmental crisis but as a tipping point in the way**  
48 **that we understand our interactions with nature – one that offers a unique opportunity to write**  
49 **environmental sustainability into our “new normal”.**  
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