

*Dejan Oblak*¹¹⁴*Tena Perišin*¹¹⁵*Petra Kovačević*¹¹⁶

YOUNG AUDIENCE AND CLIMATE CHANGE REPORTING

Original Paper

<https://doi.org/1059014/XNSB7568>

Abstract

This study, part of the Croatian Science Foundation's Journalism Research Lab (Jourlab) project, investigates young people's perceptions of climate change reporting in Croatian media, along with the most effective storytelling methods in climate reporting. The research was conducted in two phases, starting with interviews of young journalism students who shared their personal experiences with climate journalism. These interviews were complemented by a hands-on pilot project within the "Journalism Research Lab" course at the Faculty of Political Science, where 40 journalism students (ages 21-25) created multimedia stories on climate change. Through project-based learning, students used digital tools, audio-visual formats, and data visualizations, gaining practical experience that deepened their engagement with the topic. Following the production phase, in-depth interviews revealed that while students initially viewed climate change as abstract, producing their own stories made the issue more tangible and relevant. Building on this, the second research phase involved focus groups with young audiences aged 18-25 from four Croatian cities. Participants, after discussing their media habits, watched climate change stories presented in two versions, each using distinct storytelling techniques. Findings showed that young audiences are indeed interested in climate topics, provided that the reporting is visually engaging, well-explained, and contextualized. This study highlights that innovative storytelling formats are crucial to capturing and sustaining young audiences' interest in climate issues, emphasizing a need for media support in developing such approaches.

Keywords: climate change, climate journalism, climate news, young audiences

114 Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb, Croatia, dejan.oblak@fpzg.hr

115 Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb, Croatia, tena.perisin@fpzg.hr

116 Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb, Croatia, petra.kovacevic@fpzg.hr

The Ambiguous Relationship Between Young Audiences and News

“How we cover the impact of human activity on our environment will form the basis for how history judges this generation of journalists. Political scandals will come and go, economic crises and wars may impact us for decades, but decisions made now by everyone in our society will affect our climate and be felt forever,” states Liz Corbin, Head of News and Deputy Media Director of the European Broadcasting Union (Borchardt et al., 2023). This statement highlights a critical challenge in journalism today: engaging young audiences with news that has long-term significance, especially on urgent issues like climate change. For young audiences, who hold the future of environmental action, understanding climate change is vital, yet their engagement with news content on such topics remains limited.

The digital media landscape has dramatically reshaped young people’s news consumption. In recent years, consumption of traditional media—such as television and print—has steadily declined, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Surprisingly, however, digital news consumption is also in decline, linked to a growing trend of news avoidance among younger audiences (Newman et al., 2024). Research consistently finds that young people are increasingly avoiding news altogether (J, 2021; Reuters Digital Report, 2024). Additionally, a survey conducted by the Faculty of Political Science in Croatia (Perišin et al., 2021) reveals a pervasive lack of trust in the news media, journalists, and journalism itself, especially among young people in Croatia.

The concept of “digital natives” has described young people who have grown up immersed in digital technology since 2001 (Prensky, 2001). This concept has become a mainstay in academic discussions, although with varied interpretations (Martola et al., 2024). Digital natives’ media habits differ markedly from previous generations, showing a clear preference for social media and other digital platforms, while traditional newsrooms have struggled to adapt to these changes (Perišin et al., 2024; Kovačević, 2023; Kanizaj & Lechpammer, 2023; Blažević et al., 2022). According to the Flamingo Report by the Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2020), younger audiences differ from older groups not only in how they consume news but in their attitudes toward it. Driven by a desire for relevance

and enjoyment, young people often seek news that bridges their personal experiences with broader global contexts. Traditional media outlets hold less appeal for them; instead, they favor infotainment, lifestyle, and grass-roots content at the periphery of conventional news (Newman, 2020). For many, news is encountered passively, incidentally through social media feeds or platforms like YouTube, rather than through intentional engagement (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018). This tendency can result in fragmented knowledge and limited depth in understanding complex issues like climate change (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

Climate Fatigue and the Challenge of Sustained Engagement

Although young people express concern for environmental issues, they frequently report frustration with media coverage of climate change, particularly due to a lack of actionable solutions and constructive perspectives (Ejaz et al., 2023). The 2023 Reuters Institute study on global climate news consumption found that, although awareness of climate change is widespread, interest levels vary across demographics and regions. Many young people are aware of climate-related misinformation, especially on messaging apps, and cite political figures as common sources of false information. Over half of young respondents believe that climate change disproportionately affects poorer individuals (53%) and poorer countries (52%) and feel that wealthier, high-polluting nations should bear greater responsibility for addressing it (Ejaz et al., 2023). However, while young people display interest in climate issues, they engage with climate news less frequently than older adults, who generally consume news more often.

This phenomenon, often referred to as “climate fatigue,” has led to apathy among young audiences, as constant exposure to alarming climate news without actionable solutions can become overwhelming (Homburg et al., 2007; O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Temporal distance compounds this challenge; young people often perceive climate change as a remote or abstract issue unlikely to affect them personally, which diminishes their sense of urgency (Scannell & Gifford, 2013). According to Bødker and Morris (2021), the future-focused nature of climate change reporting contrasts with the immediacy valued by news media, making it difficult for

journalists to communicate the issue's urgency effectively. This temporal disconnect can lead young audiences to perceive climate change as irrelevant to their present lives, creating a barrier to sustained engagement.

Addressing Youth Engagement through Constructive Storytelling

In response to these challenges, media organizations are increasingly adopting solutions-oriented journalism to reframe climate news and make it more engaging. Outlets like the BBC and The Economist, for instance, have dedicated website sections for climate change, providing in-depth, accessible information and content geared toward social media platforms. The Next Gen News Report by FT Strategies and KnightLab explores the gap between what young people want from news and what is currently offered, synthesizing young audiences' preferences into a three-tiered framework for an ideal news experience (Itzkowitz et al., 2023). This framework prioritizes three elements: (1) trusted sources, as young people prefer news from relatable voices with first-hand experience; (2) personal relevance, as they seek topics that interest them and offer actionable steps; and (3) a storytelling style that is visually rich, convenient, and allows for deeper exploration if desired (Ennis, 2024).

Constructive and solutions-oriented climate journalism is becoming increasingly important in public service journalism. According to the EBU News Report, *Climate Journalism that Works – Between Knowledge and Impact* (Borchardt et al., 2023), climate change is “possibly the greatest story of our lifetime.” However, audiences often disengage from climate coverage due to a lack of constructive framing and relevance. Lead author Alexandra Borchardt stresses the need for newsrooms to shift from predominantly negative coverage toward solutions-oriented journalism, equipping journalists with a more comprehensive understanding of climate issues. Liz Corbin, Head of the EBU Media Desk, noted that almost every editor interviewed emphasized that effective journalism must focus on solutions, not just problems. Corbin further stated that transitioning to impactful climate journalism requires a change in mindset across newsrooms: “If climate change journalism is to work, it will need to permeate everything we do. Like any transformation, it is not something you do

once and move on; this requires a change in mindset” (Borchardt et al., 2023).

The EBU report includes case studies on impactful climate journalism, newsroom reorganization guides, and cross-genre expertise-building strategies. Norway’s public broadcaster NRK exemplifies a successful approach; in 2020, NRK reorganized its newsroom to create dedicated climate-focused teams in Oslo and Bergen. This structure, explains News Director Helje Solberg, helps ensure that slow-moving climate coverage isn’t overshadowed by urgent news events. “Journalism that is slow-moving on a major crisis will easily lose out to big news like the war in Ukraine” (Borchardt et al., 2023). NRK’s climate journalism model, centered around breaking news, investigative reporting, and constructive storytelling, has seen

high engagement levels among young people, underscoring the effectiveness of solutions- oriented and visually rich formats.

Innovative Storytelling Methods in Conveying Climate Change to Young Audience

In addition to adopting constructive and solutions-oriented journalism principles, other innovative storytelling methods have been proposed to better engage young audiences with climate news or news in general. One promising approach involves using YouTuber-like presentation styles in news content. Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill (2022) explored how mimicking the informal, personal, and interactive style of popular YouTubers affects young audiences’ engagement with news. Their study found that integrating these elements can make news content more relatable and engaging for younger viewers, thereby increasing their interest and involvement in climate issues.

Another approach is to frame climate change within the context of personal lifestyle choices and consumer habits. Elgesem, Knudsen, and Fløttum (2024) examined how Norwegian journalists perceive covering climate change from a lifestyle perspective and whether they believe this type of reporting should offer practical advice and solutions for climate-friendly living. Their findings indicate that while journalists from various fields, including politics, economics, and culture, cover climate-related lifestyle

issues to varying extents, many support a constructive approach aimed at providing audiences with actionable information to encourage sustainable living. This shift towards more relatable, lifestyle-oriented coverage has the potential to enhance public engagement and motivate both individual and collective action on environmental challenges (Elgesem et al., 2024).

Additionally, interactive and visually engaging formats can capture young audiences' attention effectively (Wang et al., 2018). Utilizing graphics, infographics, videos, 3D maps, and interactive elements makes climate content more accessible and easier to understand (Segel & Heer, 2010). Hart and Feldman (2018) found that the use of interactive digital media can significantly increase engagement and interest in climate change topics among young people.

Climate Journalism and Young Audiences in Croatia

Within the Croatian media landscape, few outlets actively pursue strategies to improve climate reporting, especially for young audiences. One notable exception is Klimatski portal (2024), an online news outlet dedicated to climate issues, which emphasizes evidence-based, solutions-oriented journalism. Its editorial approach centers on expert opinions and scientifically grounded perspectives to build public resilience against misinformation, particularly on green transition policies.

Academic research in Croatia has paid little attention to climate journalism and its impact on public perceptions. Despite the global growth in climate journalism studies, Croatian media's engagement with climate issues remains largely unexplored. Maria Bolevich (2020), in her essay for the *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Journalism*, underscores the challenges for environmental journalists in the Balkans, including limited editorial support, financial instability, and restricted access to reliable sources. Political influence and misinformation compound these issues, while public skepticism toward environmental news impedes effective communication. Bolevich advocates for greater international collaboration to bolster quality environmental journalism in the region.

A recent study by Klimatski Portal and the University of Zadar reveals that while 82% of Croatian citizens acknowledge climate change as real,

many view its impact as a distant concern. Nearly 30% believe that severe consequences will only affect future generations, while 35% express skepticism toward scientific research on climate issues. These findings underscore a need for improved climate education and media strategies in Croatia to foster a sense of urgency (Vidov, 2024). Complementing these findings, Brautović's (2024) report on the climate disinformation ecosystem in Croatia and Slovenia describes the spread of misleading narratives that overlap with misinformation from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine conflict. The report emphasizes the need for credible climate journalism to reach young, digitally savvy Croatian audiences effectively.

Further analysis by Vozab and Peruško (2021), based on Reuters Digital News Report surveys (2017–2021), shows that young Croatians have the lowest engagement with climate news and consider it less serious than do other age groups. Additionally, young people frequently encounter climate misinformation, particularly on social media. While 40% feel the media provides adequate guidance on climate issues, around 25% view media efforts as insufficient, highlighting the need for more targeted, reliable digital climate content. This view is reinforced by Gospodnetić et al. (2024), whose comparative study across Estonia, Portugal, and Croatia finds that young Croatian audiences see media coverage of environmental issues as lacking practical guidance and often biased toward economic over social aspects of renewable energy.

A comprehensive study on young Croatian audiences' attitudes toward climate change reporting has yet to be conducted. This research aims to fill that gap, exploring how young people in Croatia perceive climate news—both as future journalists and as the general audience. As part of the *Journalism Research Lab: Innovative Storytelling Practices to Engage New Audiences* project (Perišin et al., 2021), this study examines which audiovisual formats and storytelling methods resonate most effectively with young audiences. Specifically, it investigates how climate and environmental stories can be made both credible and engaging, identifying journalistic strategies that could rebuild trust and enhance engagement with pressing issues like climate change.

Methodology

This research employed a two-phase qualitative research design to explore young people's attitudes towards climate change, but also climate news reporting. First, interviews were conducted with journalism students who participated in a project dedicated to climate change in Croatia. Second, attitudes of Croatian youth towards climate issues and how media report on it were explored through a series of focus groups discussions in four major cities.

Phase One: In-depth interviews with Journalism Students

The results of the national survey of news attitudes in Croatia (Perišin et al, 2021) inspired a pilot project at the Faculty of Political Science as part of the BA Journalism module called "Journalism Research Lab ". Twenty five journalism students between the ages of 21 and 25 produced multimedia stories dedicated to contextual climate reporting in the context of Croatia and its specific climate issues.

For this, students were trained in the use of various digital tools which allowed them to experiment and develop different audio-visual and data visualization formats, using smartphones and even drones to produce stories about climate change. The goal was to tell stories in a way that their peers – young people – would assess as interesting and highly comprehensive.

The production phase was followed by an online explorative survey with open-ended questions for eighteen students who completed the module, and in-depth interviews with eight of them. Both methods were used to explore the ways in which journalism students perceive and understand climate reporting, particularly in the context of journalism they implemented during the project. The survey was conducted in June 2022, while in-depth interviews happened in July 2022.

Phase Two: Focus Groups with Young Audiences

The second research phase involved conducting eight face-to-face focus group discussions with young audiences in four major cities in Croatia: Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, and Osijek. The focus groups were conducted in October and November 2023. A total of 64 participants were recruited,

divided into two age subgroups—18–21 and 22–25 years old—to capture a range of perspectives within the target demographic. Other than balanced gender representation, the groups included both university students and employed young adults, with equal distribution of secondary- and higher-education backgrounds among those employed. This heterogeneity allowed us to capture a broad range of perspectives on the research topic.

The first part of the focus group interviews included discussions on young people's media habits, their attitudes towards news and journalism, along with their perceptions of climate news in Croatian media. To further explore these perceptions and test the effectiveness of innovative storytelling techniques, an experimental component was incorporated into the focus groups. Eight video news stories were produced, covering four environmentally significant topics, each presented in two versions: a traditional format and an innovative one. The innovative formats represented the approaches developed in the pilot project mentioned in the first research phase. Two of these topics were directly related to climate change—"Global Increase of Temperature" and "Rising Sea Levels"—chosen for their direct relevance to the Croatian context and their potential impact on local communities.

The first (traditional) versions adhered more to conventional journalistic practices prevalent in Croatian media, focusing primarily on presenting problems through expert interviews and factual reporting. In contrast, the innovative versions integrated elements designed to enhance engagement among young audiences. These included a greater emphasis on contextual explanations to deepen understanding, the use of relatable protagonists to foster emotional connections, and a constructive narrative that not only highlighted the issues but also presented potential solutions and positive developments. Visual enhancements such as animated graphics and compelling introductions were also employed to make the content more appealing and accessible.

Finally, a thematic analysis of focus group transcripts was conducted to explore the dominant themes related to participants' general attitudes toward media consumption, news and journalism in Croatia. The purpose of this method was to inductively search for patterns and systematically engage with meanings, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (2022). This approach involved familiarization with data through

interview transcripts, development of codes, construction of provisional themes, revision of validity of initial themes, and finally definition of each theme and subtheme. The analysis focused on emerging themes regarding participants' sentiments toward climate change and climate journalism, including the preferred audience engagement techniques in climate reporting.

Overall, the two interconnected phases of the research provided a comprehensive examination of innovative storytelling from both the producer and audience perspectives. The first phase focused on journalism students as emerging content creators, exploring how engagement with innovative storytelling techniques influenced their interest in climate change reporting. The multimedia content they produced was characterized by interactive elements and strong visual components.

The second phase of the research built upon these findings by assessing how the target audience—young adults in Croatia—perceived and engaged with these innovative storytelling techniques. By presenting them with stories similar to those developed by the students, the effectiveness of these methods in capturing attention, enhancing understanding, and fostering interest in climate change topics among young audiences was evaluated.

Results

Engagement and Innovation in Climate Journalism: Perspectives from Journalism Students in Croatia

Based on survey responses and eight in-depth interviews, our study found that journalism students in Croatia perceive current climate journalism as insufficiently engaging for young audiences. Many students felt that climate stories are often poorly explained, with traditional storytelling formats that fail to capture younger viewers' interest. During interviews, they emphasized that climate topics would benefit from enhanced visualization, such as infographics and animations, to make information more accessible and engaging.

The survey and interview data revealed that, initially, most students regarded climate change as an abstract topic. However, as they began working on specific stories and experimenting with innovative storytelling approaches, their interest and understanding of the topic grew. One student reflected,

“I never paid attention to such topics, but when I started to work on a specific topic and when I saw the work of other students, I understood it is the major topic.” (Interviewee 3)

Another student shared that working on a story about a beekeeper’s struggles with climate change

“...opened my eyes... I met a beekeeper who lost tons of honey due to climate changes, and I never thought about it. This opened up something big for me.” (Interviewee 1)

Throughout the semester, students experimented with digital tools and concluded that strong visual elements are crucial for attracting young audiences. They suggested that platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook could serve as effective channels for climate communication, offering formats more aligned with young people’s media consumption habits. As one student noted,

“Climate change should be communicated to young people in a visual way through TikTok, Instagram, Facebook to make them think more about it.” (Interviewee 8)

Another explained,

“Everybody told the story in his own way, different from the traditional way which would be just a tv report or an article. And we consider the content we created innovative.” (Interviewee 5)

When defining effective and innovative storytelling for young audiences in climate journalism, interviewees highlighted the importance of interactive and visually engaging formats. One student remarked, *“I think innovation is... using graphics, 3D maps... things that capture attention in a new way”* (Interviewee 2), underscoring the need for modern visual elements. Some students suggested that innovative journalism could adopt a conversational tone, making content feel as if it were *“explaining it to a friend... make it simpler and engaging... not like you’re talking to some distant viewer”* (Interviewee 7).

While some students argued that innovation doesn't require abandoning traditional formats, they felt it could be achieved by layering interactive elements onto existing structures. One explained,

“Even if we kept the standard news layout, adding things like time-lapse or interactive maps could make a big difference... you're keeping some of the structure but just making it modern”
(Interviewee 3).

However, students also identified challenges in the Croatian media landscape, particularly restrictive editorial policies and limited support for in-depth investigative reporting, as barriers to innovative climate journalism. One student noted,

“Journalists can be innovative to a degree... if the editorial policy allows... but it's hard to see that happening anytime soon”
(Interviewee 4).

This contrasts with practices in global media outlets, where dedicated climate sections and supportive editorial policies facilitate comprehensive and impactful climate coverage—a level of commitment less common in Croatian media.

Insights from Focus Groups: What Climate News Should Be

Building upon these insights from the journalism students, the second phase of our research aimed to understand how young audiences in Croatia perceive climate news in Croatian media outlets, but also the innovative storytelling techniques in climate change reporting. Engaging young audiences remains one of the most significant challenges not just for Croatian newsrooms, particularly when reporting on complex issues like climate change and environmental protection.

Exploring News Attitudes and Engagement Among Young Croatians

First, the general news attitudes of participants were explored. A clear distinction emerged between the two age subgroups (18-21 and 22-25). Some participants aged 18-21 expressed that they encounter news passively, often coming across headlines on social media by chance. Their engagement is selective, focusing mainly on topics of personal interest,

like entertainment, sports, or local events. On the other hand, individuals aged 22-25 talk about more intentional and critical engagement with the news. They actively seek diverse sources and show a broader interest in politics and global events, often scrutinizing sources for bias and quality. This subgroup's critical approach reflects a heightened awareness of media quality and bias, which influences their selective trust in news sources.

Participants are generally aware of global crises and significant political events, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but their understanding often lacks depth. Many participants admitted that while they knew of these issues, they struggled with context or historical background, which made it difficult for them to fully grasp the ongoing complexities. Some expressed frustration with Croatian media's lack of detailed coverage, feeling compelled to search for international sources like the BBC to gain a comprehensive understanding. The absence of thorough, context-rich reporting leaves young readers disengaged or misinformed, highlighting a gap that interactive or in-depth reporting could address.

In this sense, a notable theme in the focus groups was news fatigue in general. Initially, participants are interested in news events, particularly those with immediate relevance, such as the Ukraine conflict or local crises. However, due to information overload and the rapid, transient nature of news on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, young people quickly lose interest. Participants described their generation's reduced attention span, shaped by social media's rapid-scroll format, as a barrier to sustained engagement with complex topics. This fleeting attention often limits them to superficial knowledge of issues, as many abandon news stories once initial curiosity fades.

Distrust in Media and the Appeal of Authenticity

A strong distrust of traditional media and social media influencers alike was evident among participants. While they generally expect objectivity from journalists, they perceive a trend of sensationalism and "clickbait" tactics designed to drive traffic rather than inform. Headlines that exaggerate or misrepresent stories diminish the participants' trust in the content, leading many to disregard articles they perceive as clickbait.

"Do you believe influencers? Participant 4: Not really. Bloggers and influencers may not have a reason to lie as much as the media. The

media just wants clicks and more. I've clicked on a shocking headline only to find the article inside didn't really match." – Participant 4 (Rijeka, 18-21).

"I don't trust journalists when I see a clickbait headline saying, 'this happened'—I won't even open it. If the title is sensationalist, I assume it's false." – Participant 6 (Split, 22-25).

This cynicism reflects a broader discontent with media's perceived priorities—maximizing clicks over factual integrity—which discourages young people from engaging with mainstream news sources regularly.

Challenges and Expectations in Climate Change Reporting

A broader discussion on journalism and the complexities of reporting on climate change was facilitated. This general dialogue aimed to explore the perceptions and attitudes of young audiences towards current media practices in covering climate change issues. From these discussions, we conducted a thematic analysis where key themes such as apathy, skepticism, helplessness, and the desire for localized and solution-oriented content emerged.

A significant challenge identified in the focus groups was emotional fatigue, as some participants reported feeling overwhelmed or indifferent due to the repetitive nature of climate change messaging in the media. Several participants expressed that they had become desensitized to the issue. For instance, one participant stated,

"I'm just indifferent... that's not a normal feeling... but it's become normal for me given what's happened throughout my life. I mean, over the last 20 years, there's been constant talk about climate change, wars, rising prices, and always some problem, problem." (Participant 2, Zagreb).

There were others with this sentiment,

"Well, for me, it's like, I don't know, at first, I was sad, of course, because it sounds like everything's going to hell, yeah, but over time, yeah, you get used to it..." (Participant 2, Rijeka)

Many young participants expressed feelings of helplessness, believing that individual efforts are insufficient in combating climate change. This theme resonates throughout the focus group discussions, with statements such as,

“I wouldn’t say it annoys me; it just makes me sad, but what can I do about it? As an individual, I can’t do anything.” (Participant 2, Rijeka) and

“I think that we, as individuals, ordinary people, can’t do anything; it’s the companies, the businesses that produce and emit those gases that need to take action...” (Participant 4, Rijeka)

“I’ll make an effort, like, you know, with things like reducing plastic now and, for example, turning off the water and similar things, but I know that, as an individual, I’m not the one who’s the problem in the end — it’s those big companies in China.” (Participant 8, Osijek)

Another significant recurring theme is the perception of climate change as a distant or abstract issue, which aligns with the temporal challenges highlighted by Bødker and Morris (2021). Many participants felt that climate change would not directly affect them in their lifetimes, leading to a reduced sense of urgency. This sentiment is reflected in statements such as:

“In 100 years, well, who knows what will happen in 100 years?” (Participant 2, Rijeka) and

“Why should I care what will happen in 100 years, I won’t be alive anymore” (Participant 1, Split)

Bødker and Morris (2021) argue that the temporal distance inherent in climate change reporting contributes to a sense of disconnection and apathy among audiences. They note that the long-term processes and future uncertainties of climate change often clash with the immediate and event-focused nature of news media, making it challenging for journalists to convey the urgency of the issue effectively. This disconnect can lead individuals, especially younger audiences, to perceive climate change as irrelevant to their present lives.

One prominent theme among young participants is the perceived ineffectiveness of current climate change reporting. Several expressed frustrations

with repetitive and unengaging content that fails to inspire action. For example, one participant remarked,

“I mean, it’s all stuff we already know, just throwing around terms that are familiar to us — climate change, rising sea levels, greenhouse gases, okay – so what?” (Participant 6, Zagreb)

Another stated:

“I think that the way they’re publishing this now won’t achieve anything at all, because there always have to be two sides in the media, meaning the liberal and the conservative one, and there always have to be two radical sides; there’s never that middle ground, never the real truth.” (Participant 7, Rijeka)

Comparing Traditional and Innovative Reporting Styles on Climate Change

During the focus groups, participants viewed both versions of each story and provided feedback on their engagement, comprehension, and emotional responses. This approach allowed us to directly compare the impact of traditional versus innovative reporting styles on young people’s perceptions of climate change.

Many participants expressed a preference for the versions that offered solutions-oriented content, versions that offered practical advice and constructive approach rather than simply focusing on the problems. One participant noted.

“If they’re just going to spend half an hour telling me how bad and terrible it will be, I’ll turn it off right away... but if it’s something from, say, the city, and then at the end they say, ‘That’s why you need to do this and that; we’ll implement this and that,’ then I’d watch it.” (Participant 1, Split)

“At the end of the video, there’s no... try this, do that... What have we gained from this, what now?” (Participant 7, Rijeka)

Participants also showed a strong preference for content that is localized and personally relevant. Participants expressed that when climate change impacts are directly related to familiar places, the content resonates more deeply with them. For instance, one participant noted the personal relevance of potential sea-level rise affecting places they have visited:

“For example, take Bol on Brač, I mean, I was there, I went swimming there 10 years ago, and now they’re saying that in 10 years it might not be there anymore, you know, and, I mean, I’ve been there, so, like, it’s a shame, and that’s actually, like, one of the only pieces of information I remembered from the whole video.” (Sudionik 1, Zagreb)

Another participant highlighted the connection between local events and broader climate phenomena:

“If Venice floods, about a week later Rijeka will flood too” (Participant 7, Rijeka).

These reflections indicate that tying global issues to local contexts makes the information more tangible and urgent for young audiences.

The use of visual elements such as maps, animations, and infographics was also emphasized as a crucial factor in engaging young viewers. Participants found that visual aids help in better understanding complex information:

“Better, because it visually shows everything they’re explaining. I mean, personally, it’s better for me because somehow it’s easier when someone illustrates it like that rather than just talking to me.” (Participant 6, Zagreb)

Another participant suggested incorporating more animations to illustrate future scenarios:

“These animations, these graphics. If more of them were used... Like, a cool example, if they showed the coastline flooding... For instance, put an example of how the water level rises after 50 years... That’s something that could easily be implemented. We (our generation) connect everything through images... when we see how it floods, it’s clear to us. Nothing more is needed. That’s it.” (Participant 1, Rijeka)

The need for more context in information was another significant theme. Participants felt that reports often lacked historical comparisons and detailed explanations, making it challenging to grasp the full scope of the issue:

“Because there aren’t any, like, historical comparisons, how we got the data in terms of what we’re comparing it to... if we don’t compare it to anything, we have no context.” (Participant 1, Zagreb)

Media's Role and the Importance of Presentation

Discussions underscored the critical role the media plays in shaping perceptions of climate change. Participants highlighted the need for trustworthy sources and engaging presentation styles to foster credibility and sustained interest. Several participants emphasized the importance of clear visuals and evidence-based reporting. One participant appreciated the inclusion of supporting data, saying,

“They supported the information with numbers, which hadn't been done in previous videos” (Participant 8, p. 323).

These observations suggest that the style and credibility of media content are critical to how young people engage with climate change reporting. Ensuring that content is visually engaging, scientifically robust, and presented by credible voices can enhance both trust and engagement among this demographic.

When it comes to climate change reporting, but also in news consumption in general, young adults favor concise, visually appealing formats. Videos, infographics, and explanatory animations are preferred, as they can quickly convey essential information without overwhelming the viewer. The younger audience, accustomed to the fast-paced, visual nature of digital platforms, finds brief and engaging content more suitable to their consumption habits.

Some participants mentioned a preference for news summaries and graphic presentations, which offer essential information at a glance. For them, the ideal news content combines brevity with clarity and relevance, maintaining engagement without demanding extensive time commitment.

“I want to know what's going on as quickly as possible, and I don't even need too many details, just the main information.” – Participant 6 (Zagreb, 22-25).

On the other hand, while our participants showed preference for concise news, they also value context and structured information. Participants expressed a desire for news stories to be organized in a way that provides easy access to the broader context of the topic. For example, having related articles grouped together with summaries allows young readers to quickly navigate evolving stories. The ideal structure for them combines short, relevant summaries with the option to explore more in-depth content.

This hybrid model enables them to stay updated on significant issues while managing their limited attention span.

Key insights and conclusion

The findings of this study reveal the complex relationship between young audiences in Croatia and climate change reporting, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for enhancing engagement through innovative storytelling methods.

Perceptions, Media Distrust, and Storytelling Preferences

Young people's perception of climate change is often marked by a sense of abstraction and temporal distance. Many participants view the issue as a distant threat, unlikely to impact their immediate lives, aligning with prior research showing that temporal disconnect can reduce urgency and personal relevance. This perception fosters emotional fatigue and feelings of helplessness, as constant exposure to alarming news without actionable solutions leads to apathy. Another insight from this research is the significant distrust young audiences have toward traditional media. Sensationalism and clickbait have eroded trust in mainstream news, while social media influencers are often perceived as lacking credibility. This skepticism creates a barrier to effective climate communication, discouraging young audiences from engaging with content that could inform and inspire action. However, the study also reveals a clear preference among young audiences for content that is visually engaging, interactive, and solutions-oriented. The success of the innovative storytelling techniques developed by journalism students in this study demonstrates the potential of such methods to capture attention and enhance understanding, making complex topics more accessible.

The Role of Solutions-Oriented Journalism and Education

The appeal of solutions-oriented journalism stands out as a way to mitigate feelings of helplessness. When young people are presented with actionable steps and success stories, they feel empowered to consider their own roles in addressing climate issues. This approach shifts the narrative from one

of inevitability to one of possibility, fostering more proactive engagement. Educational institutions play a critical role here; journalism students initially saw climate change as distant but became more engaged when creating innovative content. Incorporating training in modern storytelling techniques within journalism curricula can prepare future journalists to communicate effectively on complex global issues.

The findings align closely with those of the *Next Gen News Report: Understanding the Audiences of 2030* (Itzkowitz, 2023). This international study, conducted across nine locations in Nigeria, India, and the United States, involved 45 interviews with 18- to 25-year-olds from diverse life stages, socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, and accessibility needs. Similarly, this report shows that young people prefer news from relatable sources, covering topics they care about and offering opportunities for meaningful action. They also favor personalized, visually rich, short-form content with the option to access additional background or context if desired (Itzkowitz, 2023).

Addressing Systemic Challenges in Croatian Climate Journalism

The Croatian media landscape presents specific challenges that contribute to the disconnect between young audiences and climate change reporting. For now, limited editorial support for in-depth journalism and a lack of dedicated climate coverage hinder impactful storytelling. To address these issues, media organizations should prioritize climate journalism, establishing dedicated climate desks or sections, as seen in leading international outlets. This study provides actionable strategies for media outlets, including the adoption of innovative storytelling techniques that resonate with young people's media consumption habits. By tailoring content to be concise, visually appealing, and locally relevant, journalists can bridge the gap with young audiences, encouraging deeper engagement with climate issues.

While the study offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The qualitative nature of the research provides depth but limits generalizability. The focus on urban centers may overlook perspectives from rural areas, where media access and environmental concerns may

differ. Future research could expand to include a more diverse demographic and employ quantitative methods to validate and extend these findings.

In conclusion, engaging young audiences with climate change reporting in Croatia necessitates a multifaceted approach that addresses both the content and delivery of information. By embracing innovative storytelling methods, emphasizing solutions, and localizing content, journalists can enhance the relevance and impact of their reporting. Educational institutions and media organizations have critical roles to play in supporting these efforts. Through collaborative and strategic initiatives, it is possible to bridge the gap between young people and climate change reporting, fostering a more informed and proactive generation poised to tackle one of the most pressing issues of our time.

List of references

- BBC. (2022). *Why Climate Change Is at the Heart of Modern Journalism*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/beyondfakenews/trusted-news-initiative/why-climate-change-at-heart-of-modern-journalism>
- Blažević, N., Oblak, D., & Perišin, T. (2022). Izvještavanje o pandemiji Covid-19 u hrvatskim središnjim televizijskim informativnim emisijama. U Jurišić, J. & Hrnjić Kuduzović, Z. (ur.), *Novinarski I medijski identitet u doba krize, Zbornik radova sa 11. Naučne konferencije Vjerodostojnost medija* (str. 27-53). Beograd.
- Boczkowski, P. J., Matassi, M., & Mitchelstein, E. (2018). How young users deal with multiple platforms: The role of meaning-making in social media repertoires. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 23(5), 245–259. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmy012>
- Bødker, H., & Morris, H. E. (2021). *Climate Change and Journalism: Negotiating Rifts of Time*. Routledge.
- Bolevich, M. (2020). The state of environmental journalism in the Balkan region. In D. B. Sachsman & J. M. Valenti (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Journalism* (1st ed., p. 5). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351068406>
- Borchardt, A., Dunn, K., Simon, M. F., Corbin, L., Kurczabinska, J., Mulhall, E., Matera, F., & Tere, L. (2023). *EBU News Report: Climate Journalism that Works*. Geneva: EBU. Retrieved from <https://www.ebu.ch/guides/open/report/news-report-2023-climate-journalism-that-works>
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic Analysis. A Practical Guide*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

- Brautović, M. (2024). *Mapping climate disinformation ecosystem in Croatia and Slovenia* [PDF file]. European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). Retrieved from https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ADMO_Mapping-climate-disinformation-ecosystem-in-Croatia-and-Slovenia.pdf
- Ejaz, W., Mukherjee, M., & Fletcher, R. (2023). *Climate Change News Audiences: Analysis of News Use and Attitudes in Eight Countries*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/climate-change-news-audiences-analysis-news-use-and-attitudes-eight-countries#header-10>
- Elgesem, D., Knudsen, E., & Fløttum, K. (2024). The Impact of Climate Change on Lifestyle Journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 25(4), 337-357. DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2023.2299463
- Ennis, A. (2024). How to Take the News to Young People. *International Journalism Network (IJNET)*, 1 April 2024. Retrieved from <https://ijnet.org/en/story/how-take-news-young-people>
- Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2018). Are people incidentally exposed to news on social media? A comparative analysis. *New Media & Society*, 20(7), 2450–2468. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817724170>
- Gospodnetić, F., Morić, D., Gološin, N., & Mičijević, N. (2024). *Echoes of the Digital Age: Media Literacy and Digital Storytelling in a Globalized World* [PDF file]. Learning Library. Retrieved from https://learning-library.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ECHOES-OF-THE-DIGITAL-AGE_-final.pdf
- Hart, P. S., & Feldman, L. (2016). The impact of climate change-related imagery and text on public opinion and behavior change. *Science Communication*, 38(4), 415–441. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547016655357>
- Himma-Kadakas, M., & Ferrer-Conill, R. (2022). Is News Engagement Worthwhile? Studying Young Audiences' Engagement with YouTuber-like News Content. *Journalism Practice*, 16(3), 457–475.
- Homburg, A., Stolberg, A., & Wagner, U. (2007). Coping with global environmental problems: Development and first validation of scales. *Environment and Behavior*, 39(6), 754-778. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001391650629721>
- Itzkowitz, A., Whitelaw, B., Donald, D., Montagu, G., Gilbert, J., Germuska, J., Lambertini, L., Fainman-Adelman, L., & Ha, T. (2023). *Next Gen News: Understanding the Audiences of 2030*. FT Strategies and KnightLab.
- Kanižaj, I., Beck, B., Lechpammer, S., & Weidlich, I. (2022). Disappointed and Dissatisfied – The Impact of Clickbait Headlines on Public Perceptions of Credibility of Media in Croatia. *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 5(2), 82-94.
- Klimatski portal. (2024). O nama. Retrieved from <https://klimatski.hr/o-nama/#:~:text=Klimatski%20portal%20pokrenut%20je%20u,1.1.>

- Martola, P., Lopez-Pernas, S., Vertiainen, H., Saqr, M., & Tedre, M. (2024). Digital Natives in the Scientific Literature: A Topic Modeling Approach. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 152, 108076. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563223004272>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Ross Arguedas, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2024). *Digital News Report 2024*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. Retrieved from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf
- Nielsen, R. K., Newman, N., & Fletcher, R. (2020). *Climate Change News Audiences: Analysis of News Use and Attitudes in Eight Countries*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved from Reuters Institute.
- O'Neill, S., & Nicholson-Cole, S. (2009). "Fear Won't Do It": Promoting Positive Engagement with Climate Change Through Visual and Iconic Representations. *Science Communication*, 30(3), 355-379.
- Perišin, T., Henjak, A., Kanižaj, I., Kovačević, P., Lechpammer, S., & Oblak, D. (2021). *Istraživanje percepcije javnosti o medijima i medijskom sadržaju – Što publika želi ?* JOURLAB – Istraživački novinarski laboratorij. Zagreb: Fakultet političkih znanosti. Retrieved from <https://zagrebnewslab.eu/jourlab/sto-publika-zeli/>
- Perišin, T., Henjak, A., Kanižaj, I., Kovačević, P., Lechpammer, S., & Oblak, D. (2024). *Jourlab Report: Creating and Testing Innovative Journalism Practices to Attract Young Audiences in Croatia*. Retrieved from <https://zagrebnewslab.eu/kreiranje-i-testiranje-inovativnih-novinarskih-praksi-za-privlacenje-mladih-publika-u-hrvatskoj/>
- Scannell, L., & Gifford, R. (2013). Personally Relevant Climate Change: The Role of Place Attachment and Local versus Global Message Framing in Engagement. *Environment and Behavior*, 45(1), 60–85.
- Segel, E., & Heer, J. (2010). Narrative Visualization: Telling Stories with Data. *IEEE Transactions on Visualization and Computer Graphics*, 16(6), 1139–1148.
- Vidov, P. (2024). Istražili smo vjeruju li hrvatski građani u klimatske promjene. *Klimatski portal*. Retrieved from <https://klimatski.hr/2024/10/15/istrazili-smo-vjeruju-li-hrvatski-gradani-u-klimatske-promjene/>
- Vozab, D., & Peruško, Z. (2021). *Digitalne publike vijesti u Hrvatskoj 2017.-2021*. Zagreb: Centar za istraživanje medija I komunikacije Fakulteta političkih znanosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu.
- Wang, S., Corner, A., Chapman, D., & Markowitz, E. (2018). Public Engagement with Climate Change Imagery in a Changing Digital Landscape. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 9(2), e509.

MLADA PUBLIKA I IZVJEŠTAVANJE O KLIMATSKIM PROMJENAMA

Sažetak

Ova studija, dio projekta Novinarski istraživački laboratorij (Jourlab) Hrvatske zaklade za znanost, istražuje percepcije mladih o izvještavanju o klimatskim promjenama u hrvatskim medijima, te najefikasnije načine pripovijedanja o klimatskim vijestima. Istraživanje je provedeno u dvije faze, počevši s intervjuima sa studentima novinarstva koji su podijelili svoja osobna iskustva klimatskog novinarstva i kreiranja multimedij-skih novinarskih priča o klimatskim promjenama u Hrvatskoj. Kroz projektno učenje studenti su koristili digitalne alate, audio-vizualne formate i vizualizaciju podataka, stječući praktično iskustvo koje je produbilo njihovu angažiranost prema temi. Nakon faze produkcije, detaljni intervjui pokazali su da su studenti klimatske promjene isprva doživljavali apstraktnima, no stvaranjem vlastitih priča tema im je postala opipljivija i relevantnija. Na toj osnovi, druga faza istraživanja uključivala je fokus grupe s mladima u dobi od 18 do 25 godina iz četiri hrvatska grada. Sudionici su nakon rasprave o svojim medijskim navikama gledali video priče o klimatskim promjenama prikazane u dvije verzije, od kojih je svaka koristila različite tehnike pripovijedanja. Rezultati su pokazali da su mladi zainteresirani za klimatske teme, pod uvjetom da je izvještavanje vizualno privlačno, dobro objašnjeno i smješteno u kontekst. Ova studija naglašava važnost inovativnih formata pripovijedanja za privlačenje i održavanje interesa mladih za klimatske teme, ističući potrebu za podrškom medija u razvoju takvih pristupa.

Cljučne riječi: klimatske promjene, klimatsko novinarstvo, klimatske vijesti, mlade publike