A Biased Story? Narratives of the Bad Company, Failing Government and Good Ordinary People

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Abstract. *Stories, both factual and fictional, have always been attractive to the human brain to warrant beliefs and behaviours. The public, politicians and even economists have been trapped to be too often motivated and impacted by narratives. This paper argues that, following the trend of neoliberal environmental policies, the narratives employed by many climate advocacy groups often exclude the behaviour of individuals when justifying and creating frameworks for climate action. Rather, the responsible 'action holders' encompass governments and corporations, two abstract entities that are often depicted as incompetent or unwilling to take climate action. We need to reflect upon individual consumer behaviour as an amenable contributing factor for overconsumption of the planet's resources. Only such understanding will enable us to understand and judge upon all actors objectively and fairly, and to develop suitable action plans for climate advocacy, justice and mitigation.*

Introduction

Narratives[1] on climate change are vast. For example, Harvard economics professor James Stock (2019) notes that as energy-related CO2-emissions in the United States have fallen by 12% in 2018 compared to 2007, the environmental left now argues that the country is on a way towards decarbonisation, while the environmental right credits the free market for decarbonisation and opposes policy interventions. However, he claims, the latter narrative is misleading, and the decline in emissions is primarily due to the recession caused by the financial crisis and natural gas replacing coal. Rather, the US will miss its climate goals under current policies (Stock 2019).

With the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change forecasting "catastrophic effects" (McGrath 2018) and the climate movement having declared a "climate catastrophe", effective and efficient climate action is urgently needed. Recent climate strikes across the world, championed by youth, demonstrate how a changing environment will affect almost everyone's lives and that involvement from as many people as possible is needed. Yet what messages do climate activist organisations use in their communication? Who is to blame, and who needs to change their behaviour?

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[1] A narrative can be described as an experiential account of temporal events; a story.

Here, I assess the primary subjects from whom environmental action groups demand actions and changes by means of narrative frames. According to Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, human communication naturally occurs through stories, and a good narrative is found more convincing than a good argument (Fisher 1984). Adhering to a long-existing neoliberal framework, climate narratives appear to less frequently address materialistic and consumptionist consumer behaviour as for causing climate degradation, and campaign to reduce individual consumption (Hayward 2019). Instead, they seem to assign primary responsibility to politics and large corporations and focus on influencing policies or driving/halting business decisions. Such a view fails to consider that it is consumers' behaviour (demand), while being influenced by producer actions, that prompts supply and production. Failing to highlight this chain of causality in our current narratives on climate action responsibility, our capacity to evoke lasting changes remains incomplete and will only be able to trigger partial and biased solutions.

I will discuss the reasons for such selective narrative construction by climate activists as well as its limits. In order to overcome the long-existing environmental value-action gap, I argue that our narratives on the causes of climate change need to shift. We need to reflect upon individual consumer behaviour as an amenable contributing factor for overconsumption of the planet's resources. Moreover, the heterogenous structures of firms and political institutions, which are composed of individuals with varying contributions, opinions and decision-making powers, need to be considered in our explanations of responsibility and power holders. Only such understanding will enable us to understand and judge upon all actors objectively and fairly, and to develop suitable action plans for climate advocacy, justice and mitigation.

The Neoliberal Account

Conventional environmental thoughts and policies at present having been following a neoliberal discourse from about the 1970ies onwards (Kirk 2008). Such is based upon the assumption that humans act in their self-interest and is broadly characterised by its key concepts of freedom, growth, profit maximisation, self-regulation of the free market, self-governance of the individual and hence opposition to state intervention (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005). However, these factors do not contradict pro-environmental behaviour, which is built around the attempt to reduce the damaging impact of one's personal actions on nature (Swaffield 2016). Individual preferences of consumers can indeed include environmental ones.

Some oppose this neoliberalist view and call for radical changes in our assessment of production and consumption and a shift from egocentric to ecological attitudes (for example Gálik and Lužák 2015). Yet, drawing from two separate studies (Kirk 2008; Swaffield 2016), results suggest

that neoliberalism has a large effect on the adoption of pro-environmental behaviour in adults and children. Therefore, I will be arguing from within the neoliberal framework within the scope of this paper. Consumption *per se* is not challenged, but regarded as an area for "positive individual action" (Swaffield 2016) for driving sustainable development through conscious consumerism. Such a concentration on personal self-reflection and behaviour change has received criticism (Rutland and Aylett 2008; Slocum 2004) and disbelief (Stock 2019) in the past. But neither will I claim that all problems of climate change can be solved through conscious consumerism nor will alternative approaches be critiqued. However, as just about a decade remains until the 2030 climate targets need to be met, or else, the strive for sustainability needs to touch upon more people and pervade more aspects of everyday life.

Content Analysis of Environmental NGO Online Articles

According to Stecula and Merkley (2019), wise use of framing can help a sender of a message to effectively communicate their case, often by assigning particular weights to considerations within the argument (also Druckman 2001). For example, a reporter described in The Guardian how climate activists employ war-like language and vocabulary to frame climate change (Yoder for Grist 2018).

The objective of this analysis was to identify who the organisations attributed responsibility for environmental climate problems to, and who they urged to take action. Content analysis was conducted on campaign samples from three environmental non-governmental organisations prominent in the United Kingdom: Greenpeace UK, Friends of the Earth UK and 350.org. They were chosen as the activities of each focus substantially on activism, they comprise local as well as international networks and differ enough in their size, age and focus of activities. 18 recent (to date October 2019) articles from each NGO's website were manually classified regarding responsibility and call-to-action narratives. Narrative frames for call-to-action were recognised by wordings such as "need to change", "have to", "require", "must" or "take action" and marked as either present (1) or absent (0). While some articles were more of generally informative nature (Greenpeace), others were taken from campaigning and news sections (Friends of the Earth and 350.org). This heterogeneity has been taken to minimise the risk that website articles may not reflect the discourse in organisations' primary means of public communication. Two articles from Friends of the Earth concerning the Brexit Campaign and the Trump administration were excluded, as well as very specific news posts from 350.org.
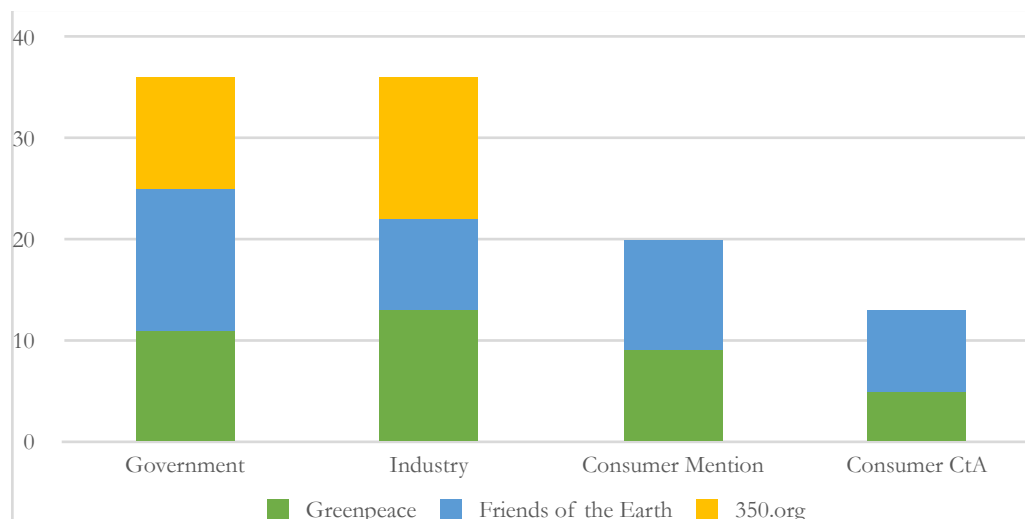
Figure 1. Subjects of Assigned Causality and Call-to-Action (CtA) in Online Articles from Three Organisations of Environmental Activism. Content analysis was conducted by manual binary coding for narrative frames regarding four categories: Government, Industry, Consumer Mention and Consumer Call-to-Action. The total dataset comprised n = 54 articles (18 per environmental organisation). The collective sample proportions π of each category are 0.67, 0.67, 0.37 and 0.24, (1 = present, 0 = absent) with standard deviations of 3.46, 3.46, 4.16 and 4.43,

Data was collected regarding four broad categories. The first was *Governments*, which included any politically governing organ, from international political organisations to municipal governments. The second was *Industry*, comprising the private sector with businesses, banks and the financial sector. The last group was *Consumers*, and narrative frameworks were discriminated more in detail, as either just *mentioning* the responsibility or causal role of the consumer for climate change, or a *Call-to-action (CtA)*. All cases of Consumer Mention were a subset of Consumer Call-to-Action.

Analysis of Variance reveals statistically significant differences among the groups (p<0.01), with the consumer groups mentioned far less. However, three points of caution need to be noted. First, with a dataset of n = 54 with 18 samples from each environmental organisation, the sample size is still moderately sized, and a greater and long-time could reveal more precise results across time series. Second, the analysis is of quantitative, not qualitative nature, and therefore does not expose nuances in the weights of narrative subject assignment. Last, I only regarded three organisations, which show significant differences in their narrative compositions. While Friends of the Earth UK had the most balanced account of Call-to-Actions, CtAs to consumers were completely lacking in 350.org. The organisation itself explains in its FAQ that it focuses "less […] on personal consumption choices (which are incremental) and more emphasis on collective action (which can tackle massive systemic issues)" (350.org 2019). As this study tried to

cover impactful activist organisations without biased selection, this feature did not exclude 350.org but rather confirm its appropriateness for this analysis.

Current Narratives and Their Logic

Content analysis supports the hypothesis: That narratives in climate activism are influenced by neoliberal conventions and rather demand government or private sector actions than consumer behaviour changes. What are potential reasons for a biased selection of responsible actions observed here?

"Over the years, Greenpeace has challenged oil companies chasing new supplies. We've also called out the UK government for their failure to act fast enough on the climate emergency. Meanwhile, ordinary people have blocked tankers and fracking rigs." (Greenpeace 2019).

For one, as mentioned earlier, climate advocacy groups may regard the climate crisis as such an urgent issue that focusing on "political tipping points" (350.org 2019) entails the most effective actions. In an important historical analysis climate researcher Richard Heede pointed out that nearly two thirds of all anthropogenic emissions stemmed from just 90 companies worldwide (Heede 2014). The "decision makers, the CEOs, or the ministers of coal and oil" would only comprise a very limited number of people (Goldenberg 2013). Hence it seems to make sense for climate action groups to direct their resources towards influencing such people and their respective companies/organisations.

For the other, consumer-centric government campaigns to reduce individual greenhouse emissions seem to have increased over time. However, a fear by NGOs is that direction of attention on the private level may lead to decreased attention for large-scale action campaigns (Kent 2009).

Moreover, two studies from the same group have discovered that anger has a greater influential power than joy online and spreads faster (Fan et al. 2013; Fan, Xu, and Zhao 2016). Since it would be counterproductive to express anger about one's own (potential) supporter base of individual consumers, it makes logical sense to direct angry framed narratives at external entities, which may be politicians, governments or businesses. Furthermore, according to the studies, it would increase the spread of the story. In addition, Kleres and Wettergren (2017) have emphasised how another emotion, fear, can propel action by raising awareness. Conveying hope alongside enables people to manage their fear and encourages action.

The Bias and Weaknesses of Present Narratives

Common narratives in neoliberally lean activism share a typical framing: active people are praised, inactive people not mentioned, depicting the "common people" as relative heros. Governments and companies whose decisions are climate-damaging are blamed, while environmental ones are rarely mentioned. For example, a similar, more detailed analysis of environmental NGOs' online content finds that while the benefits of veganism are often noted, the organisations rarely encourage the reader to change their lifestyle to veganism (Galbick 2015). Such may suggest a biased account of who is asked to adapt for climate change.

Previously, a study was pointed out that demonstrated that two thirds of greenhouse emissions originated from 90 companies (Heede 2014). Yet, it needs to be questioned who these companies were serving. Naturally, any product can only survive if it adds value to people's lives; if there is demand to match supply. With consumption continuously rising globally, the consumer is integral to the issue of climate degenerating practices (Hayward 2019). Missing out on this chain of causality, the interdependence of production and consumption, equals missing out on the underlying core principles driving climate exploitation. Actions targeting primarily production and its regulation will hence likely not be able to yield holistic solutions.

The Power of Conscious Consumerism

An option to the challenge with consumerism comprises altering consumer preferences to leverage the bargaining power of buyers and voters for changes in the production chain. This expresses no contradiction to the neoliberal account but rather its full utilization; if individual preferences become greener, companies are required to shift as well in order to stay consumer-friendly. So has Swaffield (2016) pointed out that in an interview, a company representative stated that a pro-environmental image was more appealing to new clients. Barr and Pollard (2017) encourage a new, growing form of environmental activism that incorporates consensual approaches and promotes the transition of inner values towards a closer connection with nature in communities and political relations. Two papers analysed the public's capability for carbon capability and names six main dimensions where a shift towards sustainable consumption would result in substantial reduction of people's carbon footprint, depicted in Figure 2 (Spaargaren 2003; Whitmarsh, Seyfang, and O'Neill 2011).
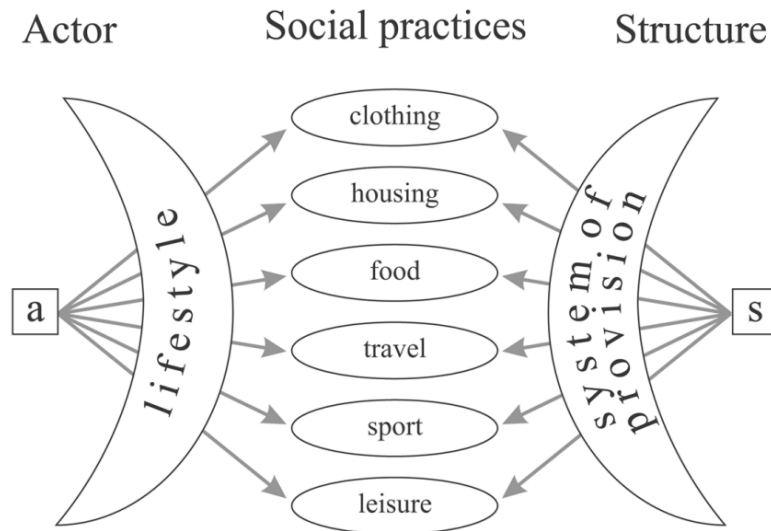
Figure 2. Spaargaren's (2003) Social Practices Model. The model describes the dimensions of carbon capability on the individual level of the consumer as well as structural level of the given socio-economic system. (Source: author)

Narratives represent a powerful tool to achieve such transition (Masood et al. 2019). Increasing research in climate communication is dedicated towards identifying how various methods of framing can shift behaviours and opinions (Stecula and Merkley 2019). Communication raising concern about climate change and encourages the belief in the power of consumer action has been found to likely promote green consumption (Roser-Renouf et al. 2016).

One field where consumer action could make a difference is food and agriculture. Growing plants to feed animals for human use is resource inefficient and has led to deforestation for the establishment of farmland (Bajželj et al. 2014; Pimentel and Pimentel 2003). Veganism has been claimed to be able to achieve an "astronomical [effect], particularly for citizens of wealthy and developed countries where consumption is highest" (Galbick 2015). Narratives regarding such a lifestyle have already spurred investments and impacted consumer lifestyles, with one in five young adults in the United Kingdom reported to follow a vegetarian or vegan diet in 2018 (Smithers 2018).

Intriguegly, consumers expressed little confidence that their actions were decreasing their personal contribution to climate change, but confidence increased when considering that such actions would be taken up by the majority of the population (Roser-Renouf et al. 2016). Similarly, Höppner (2009) has argued that until climate policies and their motivations for engagement directly addressed "citizen engagement", they would be limited in their contribution to sustainable decision-making. These conclusions suggest that, if applied on a large scale,

consumer consciousness could induce a domino-like effect prompting more and more people to adopt such a lifestyle.

Bridging the Environmental Value-Action Gap

How can behaviour change be achieved? Environmental organisations find themselves in a highly influential position, with millions of active members and followers. While attempts to change consumer behaviour have not always been of great success, their vocal power and unique presence in almost all groups of society may represent the key for its advancement. Four suggestions for climate activism groups to take action to raise consumer consciousness will be presented.

> *Collective Social Transition.* Yoder for Grist (2018) describes in the Guardian how climate activism may employ a war-like and demonising language (also Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2017). This may have potentially dehumanising effects for individuals who are grouped together under a framing of "company" or "government". However, when workers from the fossil fuel industry and climate activists met for the first time during the Colorado Climate, Jobs and Justice Summit, the exchange of their stories spurred understanding among both groups. Since the immediate implementation of those climate policies demanded by activists would lay many workers off, it will be necessary to spur exchange and find solutions together. Adaptation will require a shift in the institutional and social structures we currently function in, and such change will require communication and cooperation (c.f. Andersson and Keskitalo 2018). Climate organisations should try in their narratives to not demonise humans but offer ways to develop new solutions.

> *Soothing emotions.* In a psychological study, researchers found that higher uncertainty towards natural resources promoted participants to preferentially act selfishly rather than for the collective good (Hine and Gifford 1996). Morton et al. (2011) note how this might, for example, halt individuals from limiting their energy consumption, as uncertainty about its future prevail. Positive framing has been shown to induce problem-solving and raise willingness to change towards more sustainable behaviours (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2017; Yoder for Grist 2018). If climate campaigns were to capture such frames, and spread them, the environmental benefits from large scale conscious consumer behaviour shifts could be enormous.

Behavioural research. Spaargaren (2003) has called for *environmental heuristics* to be developed for each of the social practices outlined in Figure 2. Promoting such 'rules of thumb' of how to best act could well be done by environmental NGOs. Certainly, there are some NGOs, such as ethicalconsumer.org, focusing on precisely such a field. Yet, considering previous arguments, collective and large-scale shift seem necessary, that change our narratives and frame for individual change. Other behavioural insights practices, such as Nudging, may also be useful, and Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau (2017) have described a case when a simple rewording change encourages both Democrats and Republicans to support a carbon tax.

Education. A poll from 2015 found that only 57% of U.S. citizens account global warming to humans, and one third claim that its effects will either not affect them in their lifetimes or never occur (Saad 2014). Organisations campaigning for the climate should be even more actively involved in educating the public about the causes of and outcomes from climate change – including actions to undertake as a conscious consumer.

Conclusion

While consumer consciousness is rising nearly everywhere in the world, the environmental value-action gap remains wide. Without substantial changes in how humans deal with their resources, meeting the 2030 goal of no more than 1.5°C (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018) will be impossible. Activist groups have often targeted firms to alter their production means and governments to set regulations for both businesses and the public. Yet changing our handling of resources will not only require changes in *what* is being consumed but *how* it is being consumed. Consumers and their preferences have a largely influential power if collectively used.* Lessening the focus on consumers seems to have shifted both the responsibility as well as action power from the individuals to more complex organisations. While such institutions certainly have greater impact on the climate than the average individual, their structure prompts diffusion of responsibility. Furthermore, decision-making in either need to consider several other important factors besides their responsibility for the environment, such as competition, employees, investor satisfaction, voter satisfaction, international agreements.

Climate activist organisations are in a unique position. With the prospect of climate change affecting everyone's life (though in different magnitudes), and society as a whole, their supporters disperse communities and socioeconomic classes on a global scale. If their combined voices

shifted to address consumer behaviour in their narratives of power and responsibility, large and quick shifts in consumer preferences could actually be achieved. Rather than blaming and only raising awareness, they have the reach to educate and facilitate transitions of societies. It will also be necessary to consider different narratives in different places. For example, activists from the Global North and South seem to encounter different emotional patterns when thinking of climate change (Kleres and Wettergren 2017).

Narratives have an unprecedented capacity to reach people nowadays with the advent of new technologies. However, Nobel prize-winning economist Robert Shiller (2017) notes in his work on Narrative Economics that stories follow an epidemic infection pattern of highs and low. Climate advocacy groups need to utilise the current peak of climate narratives to spread their messages. While these have been raising the public's awareness of natural degradation, substantial changes of the scale to not exceed our climate limits of 2030 will also require large shifts in consumer behaviour. Eventually, all actors in businesses and political organisations are consumers as well. If activist groups happened to evoke shifts in the public perception and behaviours of consumption, this could promote spillover effects onto large-scale projects of combined human effort more easily, such as innovation and investment. Collectively shifting our behaviour in all aspects of society will hopefully save our planet.

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