

# THE HYBRIDISATION OF JOURNALISM IN FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CLIMATE CAUSE: A RECEPTION STUDY WITH BRAZILIAN ACTIVISTS

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## ABSTRACT

Temperature records and extreme weather events are increasingly frequent in Brazil, where the protection of biomes and, mainly, the Amazon, is a central point in this debate. However governments and large corporations have not made efforts to meet these global demands. To reverse the situation, journalism (which, in this article, can be understood as journalisms) stands as an important aspect of visibility in public debate and, mainly, as a lever for engagement on the part of civil society, pointing out causes, responsibilities and possible solutions in order to encourage everyone's involvement in solving the identified problems. This article explores the boundaries of journalism and its potential new hybrid configurations regarding engagement in the climate cause, as perceived by Brazilian activists from different themes and causes. From the perspective of cultural studies, a reception study was conducted in 2022, using online focus groups with activists aged 18 to 35 across Brazil's five regions. The discourse was categorised through content analysis, considering the emergence of recurring themes and their alignment with the theoretical framework. The research findings indicated a permeability in the boundaries between journalism and other communication genres within the discourse of participants. Additionally, activists suggested the potential for journalism to incorporate additional practices and characteristics from various genres to enhance engagement with climate issues.

## KEYWORDS

journalism, communication journalism, hybridisation, reception study, climate change

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# A HIBRIDIZAÇÃO DO JORNALISMO NO ENGAJAMENTO DA CAUSA CLIMÁTICA: UM ESTUDO DE RECEPÇÃO COM ATIVISTAS BRASILEIROS

## RESUMO

Recordes de temperatura e eventos climáticos extremos estão cada vez mais frequentes no Brasil, sendo a proteção de biomas e, especialmente, da Amazônia um dos pontos centrais nesse debate. Ainda assim, governos e grandes corporações não têm enviado esforços à altura dessas demandas globais. Para reverter a situação, o jornalismo (que, neste artigo, pode ser entendido como jornalismos) coloca-se como um aspecto importante de visibilidade do debate público e, principalmente, como alavancador do engajamento por parte da sociedade civil, apontando causas, responsabilidades e possíveis soluções a fim de encorajar o envolvimento de todos na resolução dos problemas identificados. Desde o olhar de ativistas brasileiros de diferentes temas ou causas, este artigo discute as fronteiras do jornalismo e suas novas possíveis configurações híbridas na relação com o engajamento na causa climática. A partir da perspectiva dos estudos culturais, foi realizado um estudo de recepção, no ano de 2022, com aplicação de grupos focais online, com ativistas, de 18 até 35 anos, das cinco regiões do Brasil. A categorização das falas, feita a partir da análise de conteúdo, levou em consideração a irrupção de temas recorrentes e sua relação com o aporte teórico. Dentre os resultados de pesquisa, evidenciou-se, na fala dos participantes, uma permeabilidade de fronteiras entre jornalismo e outros gêneros comunicacionais, sendo que os ativistas também instigaram a possibilidade de o jornalismo adotar mais práticas e características de outros gêneros para propiciar mais engajamento em relação às questões climáticas.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

jornalismo, jornalismo de comunicação, hibridização, estudo de recepção, mudanças climáticas

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The escalating climate crisis demands immediate structural interventions on a global scale. In Brazil, safeguarding the Amazon stands as a pivotal issue, albeit one rife with paradoxical notions of both solution and threat. Land use change, particularly linked to deforestation and the expansion of agricultural frontiers, remains the primary driver of greenhouse gas emissions. However, during Jair Bolsonaro's administration (2019–2022), there was a marked relaxation of public environmental policies (Fearnside, 2019), characterised by climate denialism, impunity for ecological offences, neglect of indigenous concerns, and promotion of mining activities in the Amazon. These recent developments have posed significant challenges to effective climate governance efforts. The Law Enforcement Dashboard (Mapbiomas Alerta, 2022) highlights that 98% of the deforestation alerts registered since January 2019 have not received authorisation or have not been subject to federal enforcement. Three-quarters (149,631) of these alerts are concentrated in the Amazon, underscoring the alarming trend of facilitating the destruction of the world's largest rainforest.

Despite temperatures soaring to unprecedented levels and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, there has been a noticeable lack of substantial commitment

from governments and major corporations during this period. Conversely, there has been a growth in mobilisation and civic pressure advocating for the planet's climate health. An assessment of Brazilians' perception of the issue conducted in 2022 revealed that 90% of respondents believed environmental disasters are occurring more frequently, and 52% expressed concern about the environment. However, only 22% claimed to have extensive knowledge about climate change or global warming (ITS-Rio, 2023). Hence, strategies are essential to bridge the knowledge gap regarding a topic that profoundly affects the daily lives of the population across various sectors.

Among the many possible approaches to fostering engagement<sup>1</sup>, journalism (or various forms of journalism as addressed in this article) emerges as a significant element due to its credibility and ubiquitous presence in daily life, permeating different social classes to varying degrees. Appelgren and Jönsson (2021) define engagement as the extent to which the citizens care about an issue and are willing and able to take action. They suggest that journalism can foster engagement with climate issues by communicating the causes, impacts, and possible solutions in order to encourage public engagement in solving the problems identified.

Furthermore, the emphasis on journalistic production is justified by the ethical and deontological principles inherent to this domain, such as factual accuracy, timeliness, objectivity, fact-checking, and commitment to the public interest (Temer, 2015; Traquina, 2005). These principles entail a distinct process of generating media content compared to other forms of communication. However, as journalism evolves alongside the society it serves, it is natural that new media, content and even types of journalism emerge, particularly with the advent of new channels and platforms resulting from technological innovations. Consequently, journalism is expanding towards other communication genres and adapting to new formats and narrative resources valued today. Charron and Bonville (2016) advocate a form of communication-centric journalism that aligns closely with the public. This type of journalism is already mobilized by influencers on the internet. This reflects a blurring of boundaries, as some authors address using concepts like hybridity, hybridism or hybridisation<sup>2</sup>, which can introduce innovation and broaden the scope of fields while also amplifying the prevalence of media products in cultural subjectivity for marketing purposes (Canclini, 2011/1997; Machado, 2007).

In our pursuit of aligning with the climate cause, we look to environmental journalism, which, at its core, advocates for sustainability and criticises the capitalist system, colonialism, and climate injustices perpetrated by major economic powers. However, this journalism is not monolithic, and each variant possesses specific values and

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<sup>1</sup> In order to distinguish it from terms associated with engagement derived from social network metrics, this research adopts the notion of engagement related to public and political participation.

<sup>2</sup> Authors in the field commonly refer to this blend of communicational characteristics using terms such as hybridity (Canclini, 2011/1997), hybridism (Charron & Bonville, 2016), and hybridisation (Machado, 2007). The overarching concept revolves around the expansion or permeability of boundaries between communication genres, which previously had more clearly defined characteristics. To maintain consistency, we opted for the term most widely used by authors and translators, hybridisation.

characteristics (Loose, 2021). It may manifest through independent or alternative outlets or within mainstream newspapers (often associated with economic interests and practical perspectives on nature), with more or less critical approaches.

Coverage of climate change tends to focus on its effects and has only recently begun to connect local aspects with the global situation. According to Loose (2019), studies on journalism/communication and climate in the Global South are scarce, suggesting that coverage should be tailored to the specific realities of each country and should emphasise potential solutions. The state-of-the-art research relating journalism and engagement with the climate cause still has many gaps, particularly in terms of effectively reaching diverse audiences with journalistic messages. Nonetheless, some scholars, like Moser (2010), emphasise the crucial role of journalism in addressing the climate crisis. Moser identifies four directions in which this subfield holds potential: information and education about climate-related issues; engaging citizens in active participation; promoting individual actions for change, including and extending beyond political pressure; and influencing norms, ideas and values prevalent in culture.

To understand the reception of climate coverage — an area that remains understudied despite the critical importance of fostering a transformative relationship with nature — this research adopts a cultural studies perspective. Drawing on the insights of reception studies, which explore the socially constructed meanings attributed by receivers and their everyday contexts and socio-political frameworks (Escosteguy & Jacks, 2005; Jacks et al., 2008). In this scenario, the debate on the hybrid boundaries of journalism, leveraging data obtained from a more comprehensive survey, is particularly valued (Modéfica, 2022).

For this investigation, conducted in 2022, data was collected through virtual focus groups (Gatti, 2005) held across the five regions of Brazil. These sessions involved introductory questions and conversations, complemented by the presentation of two audiovisual products embodying traditional journalistic characteristics, eliciting impressions and interpretations from participants (Modéfica, 2022). Participants were recruited using an online questionnaire promoted through the researchers' and Instituto Modéfica's networks, employing the "snowball" technique. The collected data was analysed using content analysis methods (Bardin, 1979).

This study focuses on a specific theme: the hybridisation of journalism, an area that has not been thoroughly explored in previous literature (Modéfica, 2022; Loose et al., 2022). This reflection aims to examine the boundaries and transformations within journalism from the perspective of Brazilian activists (self-declared activists for some cause, aged between 18 and 35) within the context of the interplay between journalism and climate engagement. To structure the text, we first provide a theoretical background on journalism and its interface with the climate issue, followed by an exploration of hybridisation and its implications for journalism. Subsequently, we present the methodological approach, analyse the findings, and discuss the results obtained.

## 2. JOURNALISM AND CLIMATE ENGAGEMENT

The social role of journalism primarily involves the construction and dissemination of information. However, beyond its informative role, journalism also contributes to non-formal education and social action. Bueno (2007), when dealing with environmental journalism, highlights its informative, pedagogical and political functions. The political function involves “mobilising citizens to address the interests that exacerbate the environmental issue” (p. 36), including vigilance and action against the interests of sectors and companies that prioritise profit at the expense of the environment, as well as governments that are ommissive and lack efficient public policies.

Gentilli (2002) underscores the importance of information in fostering active citizenship. In response to the climate crisis, journalism plays a vital role in environmental education and raising awareness. Within this context, civil society movements advocating for social and environmental justice challenge the power dynamics inherent in globalisation, which often prioritise market interests over human rights. Consequently, education aimed at fostering global and planetary citizenship becomes crucial for cultivating a culture of sustainability (Torres & Gadotti, 2018).

By narrowing the focus to the climate crisis, it becomes evident that news coverage on this topic transcends pragmatic communication aimed solely at alerting, educating, or persuading the public. Journalism also plays a role in shaping world views and values — a concept referred to as constitutive bias by Cox (2010). According to Hannigan (1995), it is through journalistic production that environmental events gain visibility in society, setting the agenda for public debate and enabling citizen engagement in collective issues. Journalism is recognised as a pivotal arena for amplifying discussions, articulating meanings, and presenting arguments, values, and world views related to climate change (Loose & Carvalho, 2017; Hulme, 2009).

While journalistic communication plays a crucial role in fostering social articulation due to its wide reach and legitimacy, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Individuals do not solely rely on journalistic content, and there are various approaches and possibilities for developing such content. Moreover, beyond information, social, cultural, and economic factors, along with personal experiences and future expectations, contribute to the complex sphere of social practices concerning the climate cause.

Despite the recent rise in the influence of pro-climate organisations and civil society discourses in this debate — highlighted by movements featuring prominent young leaders such as Txai Suruí, an activist who represented Brazil at COP-26 (2021), and Greta Thunberg, the Swedish activist behind the school climate strikes (2018) — the concept of engagement itself can carry varied meanings. Carvalho et al. (2016) underscore the need for political engagement that extends beyond individual actions.

Similarly, environmental coverage often revolves around climate solutions centred on individuals (particularly as consumers), thereby overlooking critical scrutiny of large economic interests that primarily benefit a small portion of the population. While externalities are shared, especially harming the most vulnerable populations, profits are concentrated in the hands of a few. Furthermore, depoliticisation occurs when the issue

is framed solely within the discourse of models and numbers, where matters seemingly distant from citizens take precedence, as observed when the focus narrows to the functioning of the carbon market, for instance (Carvalho et al., 2016).

### 3. THE HYBRIDISATION PHENOMENON

Canclini (2011/1997) explored the phenomenon of hybridisation at the close of the 20th century, closely tied to technological advancements and globalisation. He defined it as “sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, which existed separately, combine to generate new structures, objects, and practices” (p. 19). Machado (2007) highlights an idea of expansion: “as if the defining circles of all arts and media were threatening to merge into a single circle the size of the entire field of culture” (p. 67), taking on new public functions and experiencing permeable boundaries.

Canclini (2011/1997) stresses the importance of maintaining a critical perspective on the phenomenon: “a non-naive theory of hybridisation is inseparable from a critical awareness of its limits, of what is not allowed, or unwilling or unable to be hybridised” (p. 27). He highlights the necessity for political reflections on the tensions between media that, when converging or being compelled to converge, may not always synchronise harmoniously. Machado (2007) observes that while hybridisation fosters complexity and innovation, it also gives rise to asymmetries in the cultural elements it amalgamates. Consequently, there is pressure for media and techniques to converge, leading both receivers and producers to blend and transgress the typical characteristics of their respective media for marketing purposes. This rapid adaptation often occurs without allowing sufficient time for each field to mature, potentially resulting in aesthetic and functional fireworks.

Although hybridisation is associated with an expansion in the possibilities of individualised consumption and the very possibility of media production by receivers within the so-called cyberculture (Santaella, 2003; Lévy, 1999), the participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009) that emerged from these processes still exhibits significant power asymmetry in relation to the media. This is because they can filter or direct receiver participation. On the other hand, there are always small pockets of agency that offer some degree of opposition or contestation. According to Martín-Barbero’s map of mediations (2003/1987), the cultural practices of reception are tactical, occurring within the mediations of everyday sociality and rituals, generally outside the institutional sphere. Consequently, in response to media hegemony, receiver resistance strategies, such as oppositional readings or argumentative appropriations, use these loopholes. While the media outlets have ample resources, such as media space, technological infrastructure and specialised professionals, often operating within institutional and technical mediations, receivers rely on their limited resources, such as personal networks, employing almost “guerrilla” tactics to enact satirical or protest-driven resignification or reinsertion in contexts that alter their meanings.

#### 4. THE INTENSIFICATION OF JOURNALISTIC HYBRIDISATION

As a social practice, journalism is a form of interaction that undergoes continual transformation over time. Although the characteristics Otto Groth (2011; as cited in Xavier & Pontes, 2019) attributed to journalism in the early days of the activity, such as periodicity, universality, timeliness and publicity, persist, the evolving context has imbued new rhythms and new guises to what was traditionally understood as journalism. Groth's perspective of newspapers as "cultural works" suggests that the elements shaping their production are reflective of the community and era in which they operate. Xavier and Pontes (2019) echo this sentiment, stating: "it therefore consolidates the notion that newspapers are products shaped by socially constructed meanings that change historically" (p. 48).

Charron and Bonville (2016) outline a historical trajectory based on four journalistic paradigms aligned with "a specific and unique way of conceiving and practising journalism" (p. 28). The journey begins with the emergence of the first newspapers in North America in the 17th century, focusing on disseminating information, marking the era of broadcast journalism. Subsequently, in the early 19th century, newspapers became instruments in political struggles, ushering in the era of opinion journalism. With the massification of newspapers in the late 19th century, the focus shifted towards increasing content that could raise public interest and, consequently, drive profits, leading to the dominance of information journalism from the 1920s onwards. Finally, from the 1970s and 1980s onward, with the proliferation and diversification of supply, communication journalism emerged, which seems to be gaining new proportions with digital advances.

The authors' proposition underscores the notion that journalism undergoes permanent mutation in its operational methods, even as previous typologies persist to some extent. The paradigm referred to as communication journalism can be associated with increased hybridisation processes, a more receptive approach to professional subjectivities, and the inclusion of additional commentary in news coverage. As stated by Charron and Bonville (2016):

hybridism between press discourse and other forms of media discourse is not only tolerated but also encouraged: fiction intertwines with reality; minor news stories assume the status of major events; information becomes entertainment and readily adopts a humorous or conversational tone; expressions of sentiment and emotion supplant detailed explanations; and the tone and style of promotional discourse permeate press discourse. (p. 30)

On a daily basis, changes within established reference journalism tend to be more gradual, influenced by their consolidation and political-economic connections that bolster their hegemony. Concurrently, the rise of social media platforms and the ease of creating low-cost content have facilitated the emergence of new alternatives to mass-produced content. Temer (2015, p. 30) highlights how the integration of technologies shapes new behaviours and cultural expressions, impacting even more traditional forms of journalistic production:

new social dynamics have increasingly heightened the demand for information, creating opportunities for specialised or niche outlets focused on specific themes or approaches. Such outlets require the use of distinct languages tailored to particular conditions and recipients.

These transformations, extending beyond technical aspects, are fostering a growing trend of journalism integrating with other communication genres, particularly those associated with entertainment. Hybrid products are gaining ground, blending content that at times diverges and other times aligns with a more traditional conceptualisation of journalism.

One origin and cause of this fusion is the proliferation of blogs, websites, and social media profiles popularised in the last two decades, disseminating relevant information that the hegemonic media may not cover. However, as Jorge Filho (2021) warns, when the author is not a journalist, it is not always possible to identify verification procedures, which can undermine the accuracy of the reports. The features and forms of mediation facilitated by social networks contribute to the “blurring of the boundaries between journalism and other forms of communication”, giving rise to a new communication reference (p. 99).

Practices such as non-formal language and approximations or exchanges between regional and global perspectives have become possible through the work of communicators, whether they are journalists or not, who embrace the trend of hybridisation. One sphere where this convergence can be seen is community communication, which involves the mobilisation of the residents of the territories themselves, aiming to generate content that serves the interests of their communities (Peruzzo, 2006). This practice stems from the systematic exclusion by hegemonic communication and the financial difficulty of paying for access to traditional media, seeking to circulate the information they need for their social integration and organisation.

Another facet of hybridisation is evident in the heightened skill set demanded for journalistic production. Lima (2018) scrutinised the advent of data journalism concerning the professional identity of journalists, who have increasingly embraced and integrated IT and computer techniques into their reporting. The proliferation of infographics in the news, for instance, underscores journalists’ rapid acquisition of these and other technical skills.

Convergence with other communication genres may raise concerns. The articulation with advertising aspects can be a problem, given that advertising’s primary function is persuasion, wielding considerable influence in disseminating social values economically beneficial to advertisers (Rocha, 2010/1985). In this sense, the rise of so-called branded content, which originates from private interests but resembles journalistic content and can be perceived as a result of public interest, underscores the boundaries of this phenomenon. Covaleski (2010) notes that, in order to engage recipients who want to disseminate content, advertising communication products tend to look less and less like their traditional formats. While the objective of persuasion persists, it



takes on a different guise, employing formats and messages designed to bypass recipients' defences against advertising and provide pleasure or benefits during consumption. As a result, recipients are encouraged to share such content as it enhances their social status and extends their media reach while also providing information, entertainment, and well-being to others.

Drawing from the insights of Charron and Bonville (2016), we understand that the language and strategies inherent to advertising and other forms of communication that prioritise entertainment and emotional engagement are interwoven into journalism in the search to resonate with public interest. This hybridisation is reinforced by the advent of new media and platforms that compete with traditional outlets for people's attention and affect particularly younger demographics.

In a survey on the consumption patterns of journalistic products, Wunderlich et al. (2022) observe that adult generations tend to adhere to established routines for accessing news, favouring professional journalism outlets that align with their preferences. Conversely, individuals under 24 come across news serendipitously, such as when influencers share the news, through comments, on social networks such as Instagram. Despite the possibility of customising access to information according to personal interests, these young individuals report struggling to discern what is reliable from what is not, developing different strategies to verify the accuracy of information, such as cross-referencing multiple sources. In this way, although hybridisation may render content more attractive to specific segments of the population, it can also contribute to an ecosystem of disinformation that undermines democracy by misleading citizens and interfering with their decision-making.

## 5. METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

According to Jacks et al. (2008), cultural studies trace their roots to Clifford Geertz's sociology of culture and emphasise the symbolic nature of culture, the social construction of meaning and its historical transformation. They are a complex analysis of the culture and communication phenomena within their historical and social contexts, considering the influence of political and economic structures at micro and macro levels. In order to accomplish this ambitious sociocultural project, cultural studies have moved closer to anthropological research practices, notably ethnography.

Within the field of communication, cultural studies have excelled in investigating cultural practices of consumption and reception. As Martín-Barbero (2003/1987) asserts, these practices encompass the use, interpretation and appropriation of the daily routine and sociocultural context of audiences. In this sense, cultural studies emphasise the moment of decoding (Hall, 2003/1973), highlighting the agency of the receiver who, in spite of an unequal power dynamic, has a certain choice to produce their own interpretations of the messages offered by the media, transforming or replicating them in the culture.

Despite their potential contribution, reception studies remain relatively rare in Brazil, particularly in the realms of journalism and climate change research. A search conducted on the SciELO and Google Scholar platforms between 2017 and 2022, the

period encompassing the reported study, using terms such as “environmental journalism,” “reception,” “media,” and “climate change”, yielded only seven relevant studies, only one was conducted in Brazil, and none involved the use of focus groups.

According to Jensen and Rosengren (1990), reception analysis facilitates the adoption of multiple techniques in empirical research, employing methodological craftsmanship to blend research methods that closely align with the recipient and their moment of consumption and integrating methodological triangulations that can compare data derived from one method with another. In our study, data was collected using a survey (Calado, 2012) and virtual focus groups (Gatti, 2005). The first technique aimed to ascertain participants’ socio-demographic profiles and provide a brief overview of their media consumption patterns and interactions with media outlets and climate-related messages. Meanwhile, virtual focus groups served to delve deeper into the debate about engagement and journalism regarding climate change. Although this method is well suited to qualitative research, yielding a wealth of data on the meanings produced by messages and the media, it is impossible to generalise the data obtained through the method proposed (Kind, 2004).

The virtual focus groups were conducted on the Zoom platform in June and July 2022. Initially, the conversation centred around the engagement fostered by journalism based on a semi-structured script. Subsequently, two reports were presented, both representative of mainstream journalism: the first highlighted the root causes of the climate crisis, with a specific focus on deforestation, while the second emphasised potential solutions and issues of climate injustice. Following a pre-test research group, a total of 10 focus groups were conducted, with two groups held for each region of Brazil. Each group comprised approximately six participants, totalling 60 activist participants aged up to 35 years old (11 from the Southeast and Centre-West, 13 from the Northeast and North, and 12 from the South). The sessions were facilitated by a moderator tasked with time management and guiding the discussion. Each group spanned two hours and featured a rapporteur responsible for recording participant contributions in real time.

After transcribing the data, it was categorised using content analysis techniques (Bardin, 1979). This involved identifying recurring and dissenting statements pertaining to frequently cited topics or those of theoretical interest. The categories encompass the activists’ perspectives on individual and collective engagement, journalism’s approaches to climate change, the role of journalism in climate engagement, the relationship between deforestation, climate change and the Amazon, and alternative forms of communication beyond journalism. Based on these definitions, subcategories were also created, which are detailed in the full research report (Modéfica, 2022) and include considerations such as activists’ perceptions of how climate change causes and consequences are addressed and the use of sources in journalism. For this article, these categorisations were re-analysed, with a focus on selecting statements pertaining to the hybridisation of journalism and the expansion of its boundaries.

Analysing the collective profile of the focus group participants, we observe a diverse group of activists aged between 18 and 35 from various regions of Brazil, engaged in a

range of agendas<sup>3</sup>, predominantly environmental but also encompassing causes such as feminism, food, popular sovereignty, etc. The age range of the participants aligns with research indicating heightened environmental concern among individuals from Generation Y (born between 1980 and 1995) and Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010; Deloitte, 2021). Slightly over half of the participants were female, followed by male, with some identifying as non-binary or preferring not to disclose. Regarding racial or ethnic identity, the majority identified as white (28), followed by brown (14), black (11), indigenous (three), yellow (one) and opting not to declare (one). Most participants reported a monthly income ranging from three to five minimum wages or one to five minimum wages. Half of the participants hold a higher education degree. In terms of media consumption habits, participants primarily access journalism through websites, blogs, or internet portals, followed by social networks, radio and podcasts, and video platforms. Fewer participants rely on television, messaging apps, or print media for news consumption. The majority prefer alternative and independent media outlets, including channels managed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements, as well as specialised media such as *O Eco*, *Amazônia Real* and *O Joio e o Trigo*, along with individual journalists' profiles like Paulina Chamorro and André Trigueiro.

## 6. JOURNALISM BOUNDARIES THROUGH THE LENS OF BRAZILIAN ACTIVISTS

When discussing how journalism can enhance audience engagement with the climate agenda, participants frequently scrutinised mainstream journalistic practices, revealing the flexibility of journalism's boundaries and its intersection with other communication genres. Moreover, there was significant mention of communication initiatives led by non-journalists or by journalists broadening the conventional practices of traditional journalism, aiming to heighten public awareness of the climate cause.

Below, we underscore the key insights gleaned from activists regarding how journalism can better contribute to raising awareness and fostering action against climate change. The first subsection highlights the activists' scepticism toward traditional models and their aspirations for more mobilising journalism. Subsequently, we compile data on activists' yearning for greater integration, encompassing strategies and approaches stemming from non-journalistic communication, with a heightened focus on local voices and alternative formats, echoing the concept of communication journalism coined by Charron and Bonville (2016). Lastly, we outline the challenges associated with the lack of professional journalism and the proliferation of disinformation.

It should be noted that in this study, the age, social, economic and cultural backgrounds of the activists did not direct the focus of the analysis, given the relatively small

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<sup>3</sup> The participants' engagement in various causes was broadly considered, encompassing both individual initiatives and collective involvement with NGOs or independent activist groups. While some participants' activism was linked to their professions, the selection criteria did not specifically target individuals based on their professional background or practice. However, certain focus groups did include activists with communication-related expertise. Overall, this audience was deemed suitable for discussions on engagement due to their existing awareness of social issues and their identification as active agents in processes of social change.

sample size characteristic of qualitative study. Therefore, participants will be identified solely by their geographical location (primarily to facilitate comparison by region that guided the first stage of the study) and also to ensure anonymity as stipulated in the research protocol. As previously mentioned, our primary analytical goal was to examine activists' interpretations of the various forms and dynamics of journalism and its interaction with climate engagement.

### 6.1. WHAT ACTIVISTS EXPECT FROM JOURNALISM

Many participants stressed that for journalism to stimulate engagement, journalists themselves need to be engaged, distancing themselves from a perceived impartiality that is sometimes advocated in journalism seeking to stick to a supposed narrative objectivity: "the journalist himself does not come across as 'look, I have to be impartial', and all that" (activist from the Centre-West, focus group, July 22, 2022). The same activist from the Centre-West expressed a desire for journalists to be more engaged: "I think it's about bringing journalism back and fostering greater engagement on the part of journalists themselves so that we can have a shift towards encouraging popular action" (activist from the Centre-West, focus group, July 22, 2022).

The statements made by research participants suggest that journalists should convey more emotion and even issue explicit calls to their audiences to support efforts in tackling climate change. This practice resonates with the concept of advocacy journalism (Laws & Chojnicka, 2020), which involves journalism that takes a stance in support of collective interests:

for what you're doing now, listen to this: we need to do something together. It's urgent. It's urgent, and you have to do something in your day-to-day life, right? ( ... ). Each person you're talking to, you're listening to them, you're talking to them directly, as if you were looking them in the eye, referring to each individual, not so much in a general informative context, that the world is going through this, but that you have this responsibility. (Activist from the South, focus group, June 25, 2022)

I think things always add up. One thing I kept thinking about here is that journalism could play a role in raising people's awareness in the sense that they can help exert pressure on decision-makers when confronted with these issues, you know? (Activist from the Centre-West, focus group, July 2, 2022)

Activists also expect journalism to be didactic, exposing the contexts of the narrated facts with socio-political analyses and examining environmental issues and extreme weather events within the broader global context of the climate crisis rather than as isolated incidents. This expectation aligns with the combination of informative, political and pedagogical functions that characterise environmental journalism (Bueno,

2007). It also reflects the activists' perception of the urgency of the climate change issue, consistent with the perspective of Loose and Carvalho (2017), who underscore journalism as a central forum for citizens to become aware of global challenges:

at least in the more specialised environmental journalism, we can establish this connection between the facts, right? It's not something as punctual as in newsroom journalism, you know, you can make a connection between the fact and where it's coming from, right? In this case, applied to climate change, you see that it's not a punctual fact; there's a reason why; there's a whole connection at a global level, and I believe that journalism, especially scientific, environmental journalism, can make this connection between cause and effect as well. (Activist from the Centre-West, focus group, July 22, 2022)

show who is the agent of things. So: the agent of deforestation, the agent of warming. And not just use these names as if they were enough on their own as if they were entities that act in the world. Deforestation is not an entity that operates in the world; it is produced by something, by someone, or by some agent. (Activist from the Centre-West, focus group, July 22, 2022)

On the other hand, many activists mentioned the existence of journalistic outlets (specialised, activist-driven, or community-based) that do work that aligns more with advancing the climate cause and that mainstream outlets should take note of their practices. Overall, there was strong agreement among the participants that hegemonic practices need to converge with non-hegemonic ones in order to address the objectives related to engagement effectively. The principles outlined in environmental journalism (Bueno, 2007) are viewed as essential for all forms of journalism to halt the ongoing crisis.

## 6.2. COMMUNICATION JOURNALISM: NEW FORMATS AND LANGUAGES

The activists involved in the study voiced a preference for journalism that mirrors the approach of digital influencers, engaging in dialogue with these stakeholders and/or adopting some of their practices. They cited journalist André Trigueiro, who, in addition to being a prominent figure in environmental journalism within a traditional media outlet, communicates in a very close and relatable manner on his social networks. The communication style of Dr. Drauzio Varella was also brought up as an example:

when Drauzio Varella says something, I think: 'this is serious'. Me, at least. I miss authority (...). I miss someone who's from here and who can guide us, someone we can trust. Because when it becomes too impersonal... there's data, there's images, there's lots of things, but there's no individual, no figure here, no person who's there talking and perhaps has a trajectory that we can follow. (Activist from the South East, focus group, June 18, 2022)

The activists reported seeking information beyond journalism, citing the work of artists or social media influencers — highlighting the potential for blending these languages with journalism. This observation is linked to Temer's (2015) insights into the expanded possibilities for content sharing facilitated by the widespread adoption of technology.

There's a profile called *Árvore Ser Tecnológico* (Tree Technological Being). He's a cartoonist and an illustrator who creates incredible drawings like this, and he translates things into a very cool language, which is the language of drawing. ( ... ) so I believe that considering this is always important when it comes to demystifying scientific language and translating it into other forms because it's often complex. (Activist from the South, focus group, June 25, 2022)

Yesterday, there was an indigenous speech on Instagram ( ... ) I think even by Célia Xakriabá, an activist, right, saying, "You need to start looking at the Amazon from the perspective of those who are inside the Amazon, the people who preserve the forest, because it's not about looking at the Amazon through satellites". (Activist from the South East, focus group, June 18, 2022)

These statements underscore a media landscape that is increasingly hybridised. Still, they also highlight the recognition that traditional coverage often makes editorial decisions that can alienate audiences or dehumanise environmental issues. There is a recurring emphasis on the need to amplify the voices of local leaders who have first-hand experience with these issues. In line with this perspective, activists cite the importance of the media and community communicators in providing a platform for local stakeholders to have a voice. Peruzzo (2006) points out the importance of producing content by and for the community as a way of raising awareness about problems and solutions not covered by traditional media.

It's not only about directing communication from a top-down approach but also about empowering communicators to emerge from within the communities we want to talk to. ( ... ) to inspire other people to see themselves as communicators for their communities, to be able to adapt news in the language in the format that best serves the community that is part of it. I think that's very cool, a network. (Activist from the South East, focus group, June 29, 2022)

I follow São Paulo's community media a lot, and they've been doing an incredible job by bringing these discussions that were once restricted to a different audience. They've made these discussions more accessible and easier to understand. When you look at these media outlets, they're discussing environmental racism, they're discussing heat islands, they're discussing

what climate justice is in a way that everyone can understand. (Activist from the South East, focus group, June 18, 2022)

Thus, besides indicating that they can serve as journalistic sources by focusing on the issue, they underscore their agency in fostering a more inclusive, grassroots communication that seeks engagement with the climate cause. This form of journalism tends to adopt a repertoire and a way of saying things that resonate with its audience, fostering identification and potentially sparking greater interest. However, it is not always possible to see the marks of the investigative processes typical of journalism, which are revealed in the blurring of boundaries mentioned by Jorge Filho (2021).

Furthermore, regarding formats, the manner of content presentation is highlighted, with a plea for a more didactic portrayal of data, which is related to the training of professionals capable of translating scientific data attractively. According to an activist from the Northeast, journalistic coverage should integrate these aspects by incorporating “fewer graphics, more images, bring it into the field of art. Make it visual, make it more understandable. ( ... ) facilitate the language used in the audiovisual story. Integrate more narrated illustrations” (focus group, June 13, 2022).

In addition to citing the need to consult information they consider reliable through channels and languages that are not necessarily journalistic, the activists go further and suggest the need for an ecosystem that facilitates the circulation of information beyond hegemonic vehicles. On the other hand, this poses challenges, such as ensuring the adherence to suitable ethical procedures in content production and dissemination. This underscores Canclini’s (2011/1997) observation regarding the tensions of hybridising communication practices that have different ethical guidelines and objectives, such as journalism and advertising, and which, therefore, can become distorted when hybridized in the production of content for social networks, for example.

### 6.3. CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING AND RECOGNISING JOURNALISM

The activists mentioned that, due to the country’s size and regional diversities, the unique realities of each place deserve tailored attention. In several focus groups, concerns were raised about the lack of investment or willingness within regional journalistic products, which could make the connection between the climate crisis and local events, to address environmental issues, which are often overshadowed by economic interests.

In Tocantins, there’s a notable deficiency in accessing and analysing data and a limited interest in covering certain topics. The insufficient investment in regional journalism results in heavy reliance on press releases, sidelining investigative reporting and leading to a dominance of narrative driven by the media. (Activist from the North, focus group, July 20, 2022)

This context results in climate information being disseminated from the São Paulo–Brasília axis, often overlooking local dimensions. The geographical distance between

these centres and people's daily lives diminishes their interest and hinders their comprehension of how a global phenomenon impacts the local sphere (Loose, 2020).

In addition to the lack of journalism that could contribute to the climate cause, the consumption of fake news was also mentioned by the activists. The persistent circulation of information that appears to be news but is not built on the epistemological and deontological criteria of the subfield represents one of the major challenges in this era of intense hybridisation. While technological resources are important for engaging with the public, as noted by an activist from the North (focus group, July 20, 2022), the convergence of communication genres can confuse individuals, especially with the proliferation of messaging groups and social networks. These messages, which do not follow journalistic precepts and are designed for persuasion, are detrimental to understanding reality, as Jorge Filho (2021) warns.

Apart from television and mobile phones, there are territories where mobile phone signals are unavailable, and some people may not even own a mobile phone. Therefore, we ensure accessibility through radio broadcasts, WhatsApp, and online platforms as well. (Activist from the North, focus group, July 20, 2022)

The challenge of accessing information results in many individuals being unable to reach journalistic content disseminated through various channels that are available to us (...) many of them are learning about it through WhatsApp, through the spread of fake news, and we observe that many of them believe and propagate it, thinking it to be true. (...) journalism's commitment lies precisely in considering how we can deliver this information to those who lack access to the kind of quality information available to us here. (Activist from the North East, focus group, June 13, 2022)

In this landscape of information abundance, branded content, adopting the formal traits of journalism, emerges as yet another obstacle. Indeed, it harbours interests that frequently clash with environmental advocacy or merely offer a palliative discourse regarding the crises stemming from overexploitation.

The remarks made by the activists underscore the importance of understanding journalism's integration into emerging media consumption practices. It is crucial to explore how this integration can occur without journalism relinquishing its fundamental procedures, all while embracing an educational role aimed at fostering society's engagement with pressing issues, including human survival on a planet increasingly inhospitable to the species that degrade it.

## 7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research findings uncover the demands of young Brazilian activists for alterations within mainstream journalism, particularly concerning the mobilisation of audiences to respond more decisively to the climate crisis. They advocate for journalism to



leverage the strategies employed by influencers and to align its media agenda with that of grassroots communicators, indigenous communities, black women, and other regional stakeholders. This underscores a push for greater inclusion of grassroots communication and a departure from the distant and objective stance traditionally adopted by journalism professionals.

This indicates that audiences across the five regions of the country have a comprehensive understanding of journalistic communication, referencing aspects of both traditional and alternative journalism alongside productions derived from environmental organisations, which may not strictly adhere to journalistic principles but align with the concept of “communication journalism” (Charron & Bonville, 2016) and the idea of hybridisation (Canclini, 2011/1997). Rather than suggesting a blending of different forms of journalism, activists introduced elements from various communication genres as ways to enhance public engagement with the climate discourse. However, they acknowledge the challenges associated with this intense hybridisation, such as the proliferation of misinformation.

Recognising the importance of mass journalism for its wide audience reach, activists also acknowledge that certain interests render the beneficiaries of environmental destruction invisible and that media frameworks often obscure the problem. In addition to information, the recipients demand journalism with a political stance, as suggested by Carvalho et al. (2016), and commitment to education, encouraging citizen action (Bueno, 2007; Torres & Gadotti, 2018). There is a call to challenge and expose the normalised predatory narratives perpetuated by market interests, akin to Moser’s (2010) proposal for journalism to amplify the climate agenda. In this sense, they have already diversified or complemented their information consumption with other sources, particularly content produced by NGOs, social movements, and digital influencers addressing climate issues and local contexts.

The format and language of news journalism have been criticised for the need to be less formal to avoid technical and/or scientific terminology. Instead, there is a push for the use of art and a more intimate connection with people’s everyday experiences. It is noteworthy, however, that the activists do not mention a limitation to the practice of journalism, projecting various demands on the profession. This aligns with Lima’s (2018) observation of journalists accruing new responsibilities in their roles due to advancements in information technologies.

Viewing reception through the lens of cultural studies authors, it becomes evident that activists possess the ability to discern the underlying interests driving media production activities (Martín-Barbero, 2003/1987). Consequently, they maintain a critical stance, engaging in the negotiation of meanings (Hall, 2003/1973) even amidst a multitude of media and an overwhelming flow of information. In a way, they recognise the forces of hybridisation at play in media production, often driven by institutional frameworks for marketing or persuasion purposes. Moreover, activists understand that the hybridisation of journalism’s boundaries can also be strategically used in everyday social interactions (Martín-Barbero, 2003/1987) through practices such as community

communication (Peruzzo, 2006). They emphasise the discrepancy in critical capacity among individuals, acknowledging that many are swayed by fake content circulated through messaging apps, often at the expense of mainstream news lacking mass appeal. Hence, they stress the importance of engaging audiences in a straightforward manner and across various formats that can circulate through mainstream journalism, social networks, and alternative media platforms.

The analyses of how 60 activists perceive the interaction between journalism and climate engagement are one of the main contributions of this research. These findings have the potential to inform more effective strategies aimed at fostering engagement and addressing the climate crisis. The focus on hybridisation underscores the need to consider the array of communication formats in reimagining approaches to journalism, all while grappling with the challenge of preserving its unique characteristics and values, closely tied to a traditional model.

This study represents one of the initial endeavours to delve into the reception of climate communication on a national scale, albeit with a focus on a perceived qualified audience. However, given its qualitative nature, it is imperative to highlight that the findings cannot be universally applied. Brazil is a continental country with a vast and diverse landscape that encompasses varying degrees of access to information and consumption patterns of journalism across different regions.

Furthermore, the limited time frame allocated for data collection (two months) required strategies such as referrals and the use of “snowballing” techniques, which may have inadvertently led to a certain level of homogeneity within the study’s participant pool. This homogeneity is evident in the predominance of activists with higher education and postgraduate qualifications, likely influenced by the dissemination of the survey through the networks of the Instituto Modifica and the researchers themselves. Despite efforts to include indigenous voices, their low participation in the focus groups underscores the challenges faced during this stage of the study.

Another limitation of this work is the absence of questions specifically targeting hybridisation. The semi-structured research script did not incorporate discussions, which was only recognised by the researchers after data collection. The traditional format of the presented videos encouraged critique and the proposition of alternative approaches. There is a clear gap in Brazilian research focusing on climate engagement through the lens of hybridisation, suggesting a promising avenue for future investigation.

In terms of recommendations for further research, it is essential to include perspectives from other audience demographics, as well as different age groups and specific socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, given the lack of studies in this area, it is advisable to replicate this study in the future to enable longitudinal comparisons of climate communication reception.

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### Translation: Anabela Delgado

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