

Q&A: New book examines intersection between climate and information crises

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There is a place where the climate crisis and the information crisis collide, and Adrienne Russell wants to take you there.

"We hear a lot about both," said Russell, professor of communication at the University of Washington, "but not a lot of talk about how they intersect."

In her new book, "The Mediated Climate: How Journalists, Big Tech and Activists Are Vying for Our Future," Russell examines how journalism, activism, corporations and Big Tech battle to influence the public about climate change. The book, published in August by Columbia University Press, documents how the world's inadequate response to the climate crisis is intertwined with challenges in the communication realm. It's more difficult than ever to find reliable information and to foster healthy debate.

UW News sat down with Russell to discuss her book, the dual crises and potential solutions.

You write about how the work of journalists and climate activists is being undermined by the current information environment. What do you mean by that?

One of the primary hurdles to making progress in terms of climate action is the pollution filling the information landscape. There's a lot of energy being put into debunking bad information. But that will never work because the information system we've created rewards pollution. I started out looking at what journalists are facing—what is happening online and why it's so hard for good information to rise to the top.

We assume good information rises—that in the so-called "marketplace of ideas" the best ideas will win out. But does it really seem to anyone that the best information is winning the day? Our information environment is built to do the opposite. It's tilted to fuel the most emotional and the most extreme stories, which aren't sober, evidence-

based, solutions-oriented stories. What does it mean when we are guided by an assumption that's just fundamentally wrong? What's dictating the mechanisms of our public sphere?

The people who are working hard to make change are being undercut every step of the way. My book looks at journalists, activists and technological infrastructure. What I found is that a lot of journalists are doing a great job covering climate change: adapting professional practices and recognizing that climate justice is an issue. Activists are also doing a great job—consider the recent pipeline victories and the way [young people](#) have gotten us to think more about the rights of future generations. But it's all undermined both directly and indirectly in this information environment.

We all kind of inherently understand this because of the way we've adapted our online behavior. Just think of the things you will or won't say or do online. Everything you do is with the recognition that data is being collected and possibly used against you. There's this everyday way we're kind of prohibited from genuinely relating to one another online. There's also this reality that the people producing good-quality information and campaigns are being harassed. There's noise being injected into the system that obscures good information.

I would say there are three different levels to what's happening. One is the noise, which is when there is a lot of bot behavior and misinformation—like distraction tactics. It's hard for readers and viewers to determine the facts.

The other thing is that people—[climate scientists](#) and politicians, and especially women and people of color—are facing harassment and death threats. This is happening not just in the United States but all over the world.

Finally, we have this assumption that the internet is simply ambivalent, a tool that can be used for good or bad. We assume people like Mark Zuckerberg are trying to do good. We have given them a lot of freedom and access to make great technologies and earn a lot of money. As a result, public life is conducted seamlessly offline and online. But we must actively create circumstances where they recognize and fulfill their obligation to consider the public interest among the top priorities in their work. They're building and maintaining the infrastructure of public life. There must be rules.

Can you discuss some potential solutions to these problems?

People who study this have come up with good solutions. For example, we need to hold platforms accountable. We should break up the tech oligarchy. And we should demand interoperability, or the ability of different systems to communicate. That way, if we don't like what any platform or application is doing, we can take all our connections and content with us when we leave. If platforms were required to be open, it would make them accountable, because people could leave if they wanted.

But the overarching thing is, we need to stop thinking about freedom only from the perspective of individual rights. We need to think about freedom to breathe clean air, the freedom to use the web without being tracked and deluged with junk information and intimidated and threatened. A lot of people aren't free really to speak in public or publish work online, because they'll draw death threats, because they'll be concerned for the safety of their loved ones. We're looking at freedom in all the wrong ways.

What do you hope readers learn about the climate and

information crises from this book?

I hope people start to understand the [climate crisis](#) isn't just a scientific issue. It's a social and communication issue. That takes it out of the hands of only professionals and makes people understand that they are involved. I don't mean on an individual level, like recycling, but in the way that there are everyday things we're experiencing that are getting in the way of progress.

There is literature on how the most important thing you can do about climate change is to talk about it, and to talk about it with people who may not agree with you. Especially in the United States, there is a lot of climate change denialism, and people don't talk about it because they think there's nothing they can do.

If we instead start talking and putting pressure on policymakers, or voting with the climate and information crises in mind, we start helping each other understand things. We must accept that we're making an energy system that will better serve the public and the planet, and we must also begin making a communication and [information](#) system that does the same.

Provided by University of Washington

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