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# Making the struggle for climate jobs common—confessions from an activist professor

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Anybody who lives “in the know” of the climate crisis—and understands some of the systemic causes of the relentless expansion of fossil fuel excavation and combustion—feels enfeebled by the obvious questions of what to say and/or what to do, to change things for the better. It does matter what we say, but most of the wise things have already been said. Meanwhile, journalists covering climate summits flip-flops between speaking the truth about where we are with global warming and political realism. This perspective article is shaped as confessions from an activist professor, who has inhaled climate activism and exhaled thoughts on climate communication for the last 15 years. Noting how the Latin roots of communicate is “to make common,” the author argues that the school strikes of 2019 were the last time hope was genuinely felt across the globe, because they found meaningful action together. What can be made common now, within the fog from Gaza, the Ukraine war and the cost of living crisis? Instead of “blowing up a pipeline,” the author suggests that climate jobs can break more spells of inaction for majority publics and help unleash and shape the broadest possible mass climate struggle.

## KEYWORDS

climate journalism, climate communication, climate jobs, activist scholars, climate strategies

## Introduction

My dad was a surgeon. Frustrated by the number of youngsters on his operating table maimed in traffic accidents, he started putting pins where the accidents happened on a large map in his office—a map of the city of Harstad in Northern Norway. He told me as a kid how the pins were concentrated in places where there was no precautionary thinking and planning by local authorities. Aided by the data represented by these pins, my dad became a professor, an activist professor I would now add, who (for a time) managed to sway city politicians to put up pedestrian crossings at some of the dangerous pin spots. In 1994 Harstad became the first municipality in Norway approved as a member of the Safe Community network of the World Health Organization. In 1995 my dad—Børge Ytterstad—defended his Ph.D. thesis: “The Harstad Injury Prevention Study: Hospital-based injury recording and community-based intervention.” I dedicate this essay to him.

At his dissertation dinner, I gave a speech I have regretted ever since. Dinner after Ph.D. defense is a grand thing in Norway, “a wedding for one.” I was at the time reaching the apex of my activism days as a member of the International Socialists and spoke at anti-nazi rallies, not dissertation dinners. I was an undergraduate student, revisiting Gramsci for media and communication studies, but also on my way out of the ivory tower of *Academica* to become a full-time activist for the next 7 or 8 eight years. This may help

explain (but not excuse) why I chose to cite in my speech to my dad a passage from Chris Harman's *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe* taken from an eyewitness report of the East Berlin uprising in 1953. The communist party leadership, failing to calm down the workers rallying, summoned someone outside their ranks in order to address their grievances.

He was announced as "Professor from Humboldt University." But there was a great deal of murmuring as he cried in a voice that was far too low: "Yes, I am a Professor from the University..." There was laughter. "But I am a worker like you! Listen to me..."

As I was recounting this, I saw the professors in the audience cringe—and heard the half-hearted polite laughter from my dad. I regret in my innards the bad timing of my deflation of professorial knowledge at that dinner in part because I am now a Professor myself, vividly recalling the relief and pride I felt when promoted a couple of years ago. More importantly, there is a parallel between the way my dad looked for root causes in his approach to injury prevention—rather than just repairing the damage—and a key climate justice challenge: how to help those burnt by climate change—while not postponing anymore the joint action of phasing out fossil fuels everywhere, as if the house is on fire -before the flames become unquenchable.

Anybody who lives "in the know" of the climate crisis—and understands some of the systemic causes of the relentless expansion of fossil fuel excavation and combustion—feels enfeebled by the obvious questions of what to say and/or what to do, to change things for the better, or to salvage whatever can be salvaged of civilized human life. Scientists know more than most people about the climate crisis, but if we remain stuck in the Ivory Tower of Universities with such knowledge, we add a peculiar but also unnecessary twist to our sense of powerlessness. I have inhaled climate activism and exhaled thoughts on climate communication well beyond Academic life, in TV documentaries, and podcasts, songs and speeches over the last 15 years. This perspective article heeds recent calls for transformative environmental communication scholarship (Brüggermann et al., 2023), one in which broader societal engagement is seen as an important supplement to research. Indeed, as the beautiful French documentary *Once you know* (Cappelin, 2020)<sup>1</sup> illustrate, scholars in the field of Environmental communication, like Susanne Moser (whom I quote in the next paragraph), can prompt social change to curb the climate crisis in powerful ways *within* (not outside of) their professional capacity. Used wisely, activism can strengthen rather than weaken the quality of scientific knowledge. That is why I am basing this piece in part on personal experience.

## Words come easy—But within professional limits

In a way the title of Moser (2016) advanced literature review article in *Environmental Communication* is appropriate here: "Reflections on climate change communication research and

1 Once You Know review—must-watch essay on climate change that tells us it's already here. Film. The Guardian.

practice in the second decade of the twenty-first century: *what more is there to say?*" (my italics). Words. "Words don't come easy"—as a famous love song has it. They come easier for politicians eager to show they care about and understand the climate crisis. The current Norwegian Prime Minister has several times said that "climate change shall be a frame around everything"—words I have quoted favorably myself several times. Moser's article demonstrates that also among researchers there is no lack of promising words—neither in the dissection of existing frames, discourses, metaphors, visuals and narratives nor in the constructions of new ones.

The advances or retreats in the way we communicate climate change are not trivial. It is a step forward when and where climate communication is not reduced to the natural scientific explanations of climate change. Stories, values and norms matter too, and can—alongside ice-core measurements and climate models—help science "break into politics" (Wear, 2008). The shift from talking about "global warming" to "climate change" exemplifies a retreat; "climate change is really just global warming with all the rough edges sanded off," as Hern et al. (2018, p. 5) put in a lovely book swimming against the tide of this shift. Climate change may sound more pleasant to audiences, as Republican Spin Doctor Frank Luntz observed through his studies (Ytterstad, 2014a), but it is imprecise and downplays the gravity and the urgency of the climate crisis we are facing.

The bottom line, however, is that the inaction on climate change is due to lack of effective policy and the ways in which our societies are organized. We have said many of the right words already, and repeatedly. I oftentimes feel entrapped in a game of word fiddling while the world burns. I get particularly annoyed when researchers try to oversell their "new" way of phrasing climate change by referring to—and not providing evidence for—the failure of previous phrasing efforts. I formulated my own approach to "what works" in climate communication in a panel debate I once shared with climate psychologist Per Espen Stoknes<sup>2</sup>. My pitch—delivered in many speeches since—goes something like this: "In the climate struggle we need the optimists and the pessimists, the cynics and the alarmists and the fatalists too." Panic and hope can be mixed in different ways for different audiences and occasions, but for me, there are two indisputable constants: (1) global warming is very serious and (2) we will not be able to curb it without mass struggle on a global scale.

## The flip-flopping of mainstream (climate) journalism

Ever on the lookout for negative news perhaps, journalists tend to like it when I counterpose the first point to the "rule of thumb"—to have three positive messages for every negative one—proposed by Stoknes and others within the field of climate communication.

2 I invite Stoknes to my courses in climate journalism, but he makes a strawman out of the boring and ineffective "failures" of traditional science communication. See if you agree with me by watching his Ted Talk: [https://www.ted.com/talks/per\\_espen\\_stoknes\\_how\\_to\\_transform\\_apocalypse\\_fatigue\\_into\\_action\\_on\\_global\\_warming?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/per_espen_stoknes_how_to_transform_apocalypse_fatigue_into_action_on_global_warming?language=en) following his book *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming*.

Good climate journalists, however, can be negative—because truth-seeking is part of their professional remit. Scolding the results of the Climate Summit in Bali, in 2007, Norway’s most famous climate journalist Ole Mathismoen wrote in his op-ed: “The time to celebrate mouse steps is over.”<sup>3</sup>

But (climate) journalism, especially within mainstream media, also has professional limitations<sup>4</sup> one of which is their erratic recognition of point 2 above. During the Glasgow Summit in 2021, the political editor of *Aftenposten* created quite a stir in Norway with an op-ed scolding Greta Thunberg, and her “blah, blah, blah” take on the entire gamut of climate summits. “Contempt of politicians does not save the world<sup>5</sup>,” he opined. Nuances and longer explanations of the relationship between journalism and activism aside<sup>6</sup>, my contention is that journalists—most mornings and certainly at the end of the day—look for, criticize or commend agency-as-usual, politicians working within the system and the current world (dis)order. They very rarely factor in the demands of “system change—not climate change” into their professional equation. They flip-flop between speaking the truth of where we are and “political realism” (Ytterstad, 2011)—with scant historical memory. So when COP 27 in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, agreed on a loss and damage fund, it was dubbed “A more realist climate agreement” by the largest newspaper in Norway, VG. Their editorial argued that “Now it is more about adapting to the serious changes to the climate than about dramatic cuts of emissions.”

I have been frustrated with the ways in which journalists flip-flop between scolding and celebrating mouse steps for more than a decade. After the Climate Summit in Durban, South Africa, in 2011—COP 17—I had an op-ed published in *Aftenposten*—entitled “Instead of waiting for the 18th cowpie.” “If you put lipstick on a large cowpie it is still shit. Why is it so difficult to tell the truth about the Durban summit without using makeup?”

Imagine how much I loved the arrival of Greta Thunberg. She has moved beyond the professional limitations of most journalists and academics, consistently spoken the truths of where we are, and reminded me of the core of what communication really means.

## Communicare—To *make common*

On September 10th, 2019, 10 days before the largest school strikes, occasioned by the UN climate action summit in New York, Concerned Scientists Norway (CSN) held its yearly Conference in Oslo on how to talk about the environmental crisis. Preparing my session called “Who is this we who shall talk together about solving the climate crisis” I went to the etymology dictionary with the word communication, discovering its Latin roots in *communicare*, and its literal meaning “to *make common*”<sup>7</sup> (my italics). Communication is more about what we *make common* than what we say. I therefore

3 <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/nwBwM/det-haster-men-ikke-naa>

4 *Journalism and the Climate Crisis* (Hackett et al., 2017) is a good book to explore these limitations, and how some of them might be overcome.

5 <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kommentar/i/V95yK3/politikerforakt-redder-ikke-verden>

6 I have researched and written about it elsewhere (Ytterstad, 2010, 2011; Ytterstad and Høiby, 2014).

agree with one of the conclusions in Susanne Moser’s review article, namely the need to bridge the gap between researchers who want more effective and impactful climate communication and “those who do most of the talking (climate scientists, policy-makers, advocates in all sectors of society, journalists, editors and public intellectuals)” (Moser, 2016, p. 357).

You make things common, you say something together, when you find meaningful *action* together, which—of course—was exactly what the school strikers did with their tactic (Fisher, 2019). Greta Thunberg may very well have gotten some likes to a social media meme, asking “why should I go to school if...” But it was because that rhetoric was backed up by her body and her handwritten placard as she went on strike, and inspired other youngsters to do the same, that made 2019 the last year (so far) when hope of curbing climate change was felt by hundreds of millions (despite Thunbergs “I don’t want you to hope. I want you to panic”). Many countries—including the EU, excluding Norway—declared the house on fire because social power from below reached its apex in September 2019—with school strikes spilling over into real trade union strikes in countries like Germany. The most basic analyses of power, our very good sense on global warming (Ytterstad, 2014b) should teach us that if we are to reach the next step—acting because the house is on fire—we need to do both bigger and better in the next cycle of mass climate mobilization.

## Assembling the real justice league

The strategic question before us—if we can still see it within the fog from Gaza, the Ukraine war and the cost of living crisis—is WHAT to make common NOW in the climate struggle? What I did during the pandemic, awaiting the chance to organize mass physical mobilizations again, was to make a podcast series together with a very able climate journalist, financed by the Bridge to the Future alliance in Norway. The name of the podcast was *Rett Fram*, which translates to Straight Ahead in English but “Rett” in Norwegian signifies both Straight and Just. *Rett fram* thus both captures the need to address the climate crisis directly—head on by phasing out oil, gas, and coal—AND to do so in just ways.

The task the climate journalist Ingerid Salvesen and I set for ourselves was to recreate Snyder (2017) in real life. For those unfamiliar with that particular Blockbuster movie, this is a story where The Earth is threatened by such a formidable bad guy as to require an *alliance* of superheroes—the Justice League—to stave off the threat. So in the podcast, I cast myself as Professor Batman, and Salvesen as Wonderwoman. Together we tried to recruit real-life proxies of Aquaman, The Flash, Cyborg, and (a resurrected) Superman in a joint battle, by exploring the climate justice perspectives of Irish school strikers and a Norwegian Bishop during the Glasgow Summit, farmers and environmentalists, and oil workers in Nigeria, the US and Norway. The idea that ran through the series was to find out whether these social forces would be able and willing to internalize the justice perspectives of others, finding common ground in

7 <https://www.etymonline.com/word/communication>

the mass climate struggle that is bound to resurface as the fog clears<sup>8</sup>.

To stave off the threat of global warming, we need to make a lot of *different* fights for climate justice common, in order to muster as much social power as we can. I have it from the Expert Committee promoting me to Professor that I truly believe in a plural approach in the climate struggle; “(S)omething that Ytterstad has learned through his activism is the ‘need to tolerate, indeed encourage, all kinds of climate solutions from below.’” But they also spotted my favorite solution: climate jobs. The common ground, what I believe a real life justice league in all countries of the world have to fight for—Straight Ahead, Just Ahead—are global climate jobs that make global just transitions *away* from fossil fuels possible (Ytterstad et al., 2022).

## Breaking spells by putting up a fight for climate jobs plans

On a recent visit to Harstad my mom asked me to go through a box of things from my youth. In it, I found a letter I had written her when I was 20. After a year as an exchange student in the Dominican Republic—dancing Merengue and absorbing the Lyrics of Cuban songwriter Silvio Rodriguez—I had turned slightly Latin in the sense of becoming more extroverted too. I therefore confessed my state of mind to her candidly; I felt amiss about what to do with the complexities of love, but I knew what helped me face the “chaos of the world.” If only I find a hook within the chaos and misery of the world, and somehow try to shape that hook, I feel happier for it.

“Los años pasan sí, la vida no” Silvio sang (Years pass, that is true, but life does not). My life certainly is the same 30 years after that letter to my mom. Faced with the overwhelming chaos of the climate emergency, that great multiplier of so many other crises in nature and society, I feel better if I can hook myself onto the world with an activist strategy. Fortunately—as the Beatle equivalent of Silvio Rodriguez imagined—I am not the only one. My climate comrade and name brother Andreas Malm used the lull in the cycle of mass climate protest during the pandemic to launch his strategy for what we should make common once the climate movement revives.

The longest section of his book *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (Malm, 2021) is called “Breaking the Spell.” His case for breaking the spell is non-violent sabotage of the infrastructure of fossil capital. His strategy is radical in the original Latin sense of the word (going to the roots). The detention of Greta Thunberg during a protest of the expansion of a German coal mine in January 2023 suggests that the next cycle of mass climate protest may be shaped in more radical fashion than the school strikes. Yet Malm’s entire historical account of previous mass struggles underlines the mutual dependency of a

very broad movement and a radical flank (No Martin Luther King without Malcom X, no Malcom X without Martin Luther King). *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* does not even pose the question of what the broader climate movement could or should make common.

Cue Climate Jobs. I found my favored hook when I observed the launch of the South African *One Million Climate Jobs* campaign in Durban 2011. The Bridge to the Future Alliance in Norway—which I have been building in Norway for 10 years—is centered around the demand for 100,000 climate jobs as a way of putting a brake on Norwegian Oil and Gas. With the inclusion of several large trade unions, environmentalists, small farmers, scientists and the Norwegian Church, the alliance is very broad. The present Labor Party-led Government appears to recognize us more than any previous Government. At the Conference of the Bridge to the Future in 2022, the Minister of Business invited the alliance to fight more and fight for *more* than 100,000 climate jobs to shift the fossil fuel exporting Norwegian economy. But whenever there is a Labor Party-led Government in Norway, the unions tend to take the same approach as my dad (who is also a jazz pianist) takes to jazz: “less is more.” They are far too easily satisfied by verbal acknowledgments, minor concessions, and piecemeal victories. I constantly worry about “a Labor Party that aims to take away the sting of the climate movement before it begins to bite” (Ytterstad, 2015, p. 173).

In my broad academic survey of climate jobs campaigns around the world (Ytterstad, 2021), I singled out the Portuguese campaign, spearheaded by the group Climáximo, as the most inventive example of how you can involve workers in campaigns both to phase out coal and to keep jobs in solar power (being shut down, due to Chinese competition). The last time I met activists from Climáximo was at the Attac Summer University in Mönchengladbach in August 2022. Some of them came directly from Ende Gelände protests, now targeting gas facilities as well as coal (one of them had her arms in a sling, after skirmishes with the police) to speak about the need for climate jobs training workshops. As an Activist Professor, I felt humbled by their activism proper.

What I did in March 2023, was to invite Leonor from Climáximo to address the 10th Conference of the Bridge to the Future in Oslo. The goal was to inspire the climate movement in Norway with the experience of actions in Portugal. By this, I hoped to reinforce my key argument that climate jobs can *break the spells*. Climate jobs can break *many* spells. They can break the time-spell between the needs of the present with the needs of the future. They can give us something to fight for, and flesh out what just transition means. The climate jobs strategy can include activists whose theory of change is “inside the system” alongside those of us who believe a rupture with the current system is necessary. It steers between the (largely) inefficient and alienating concepts of “green growth” and “degrowth” because it is specific about what we need to stop (burning of fossil fuels) and what jobs we need most in order to cut emissions. But most of all, I believe climate jobs plans can help unleash and shape the broadest possible mass climate struggle.

States will not implement such climate jobs plans without mass mobilizations from below. Fortunately, a global ‘we’ emerged during the school strikes, where a climate jobs approach was palpable. On September 20, 2019, 17-year-old climate strike

<sup>8</sup> Most of the first episode was in English, because we interviewed Dimitris Stevis, a Colorado State University-based Professor and leading expert on just transition. See: <https://www.broentilframtiden.no/podkastrettfra>.

organizer Daisy spelled out one of their demands in Australia to the Guardian live blog:

If our government cares about all of us then they need to get on with the job of stopping any new coal, oil and gas projects, powering Australia with 100% renewable energy by no later than 2030, and doing all this while funding just transition and jobs for all fossil fuel workers and their communities so that no one is left behind.

Can we put up a real fight for climate jobs plans with millions of people, together? That is the existential Shakespearian and most practically poignant question for me, one I invite both academics and activists to ponder together. Contact me if you want to help me make it more common.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication

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