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## Journalists Need to be a Voice for the Weakest Stakeholders in the Climate Crisis

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JOUR 351 – Ethics Paper

## **Journalists Need to be a Voice for the Weakest Stakeholders in the Climate Crisis**

### **Introduction**

The planet is facing a climate issue and humans are the root cause of the problems. The solutions to these problems are centered around the best outcomes for only humans. It has been proven that solutions to climate problems will take some time, but humans will be okay until then. But there is a silent voice that is being left out of the climate discussion. This voice cannot wait a few more years for a solution, as it is being affected now. They are being directly affected by human-made climate issues every day, but they cannot speak for themselves. Plants and animals are the weakest stakeholders in the climate crisis.

An aspect of being a journalist is to be a voice for the weakest stakeholders, but journalists have not been giving proper justice on behalf of nature when covering climate issues. In an article titled “The Media are Complacent While the World Burns” by Mark Hertsgaard, et al, he explains the issue in one simple sentence. Hertsgaard says, “yet at a time when civilization is accelerating toward disaster, climate silence continues to reign across the bulk of the US news media.” (*Columbia Journalism Review*). The silence around the climate crisis is an issue in general, but it causes the most damage to the weakest stakeholders. In a time when human issues are front and center, journalists must be the voice for the nonhuman perspective.

### **The Ethical Aspect**

“Voice for the voiceless” is a phrase commonly used in journalism. It can also be thought of as speaking for the weakest stakeholders. This phrase could also be taken more literally, with journalists speaking up for animals and plants that do not have a “voice” humans can understand.

According to Dr. Carrie Packwood Freeman, et al, in the 2011 journal article “Giving Voice to the Voiceless”, “as part of journalism’s commitment to truth and justice by providing a multiplicity of relevant perspectives, journalists must provide the perspective of nonhuman animals (NHA) in stories that affect them.” (Freeman, et al, 2). If something in the world affects a population, no matter the species, it is still important to share that perspective.

Freeman, when looking at the focus of the SPJ code of ethics, also states, “When one considers ideas of diversity, open exchange, and giving voice to the voiceless, these principles apply not only to allowing humans to advocate on behalf of other animals but also to embrace fully the concept of diversity by including the animal's own voice and perspective.” (Freeman, et al, 3). There needs to be a shift from focusing on only the human perspective to the perspectives of all living things. This shift needs to not just happen in the way journalists write, but the guidelines they follow as well. Most aspects of the ethical theories apply to the human perspective. What would happen if ethical guidelines were rephrased to incorporate more than the human perspective? Care-based ethics is the most applicable theory to the issue of the missing animal perspective in media. The golden rule can be opened up to not just include humans. This would allow humans to attempt to put themselves in the perspective of nature. This perspective switch can help journalists better cover the weakest stakeholder.

### **Issue: Why are journalists not speaking up for nature?**

Journalists serve as watchdogs for the weakest group. They also speak out about injustices for the greater good of the public. Yet, the weakest group is taking the most damage from the climate crisis and the public is not hearing about it. Why is it that society hears less about other perspectives other than their human one? Journalism is run by humans for the greater

good of the world they live on. This is part of the reason the animal perspective is being left out of the climate narrative. In an article from *The Nation*, titled “A New Beginning for Climate Reporting”, writers Mark Hertsgaard and Kyle Pope highlighted some key issues news media brought up when explaining why they do not cover the climate crisis. The excuses range from “we don’t know where to start”, “our viewers will think we’re activists”, “the problem is too big for us to make a difference”, “it’s too depressing” and “we’re already pulling our weight.” (Hertsgaard and Pope). Hertsgaard and Pope then went on to explain that all these issues can be overcome, especially because certain news organizations are already doing it.

The lack of coverage also stems from speciesism. Humans generally have more care about the well-being of their species over others. Humans have also caused the majority of climate issues. In an article for SpeciesRevolution.org, titled "You Aren't a 'Voice for the Voiceless'", the author argues that animals have a voice of their own that is being silenced by humans. They communicate with their own species and can explain when something is wrong. Even humans can understand when an animal is expressing certain emotions, such as fear or excitement. Just because humans cannot understand what they are saying in a language sense, does not mean they are voiceless. The author also connects this concept to the 'human savior complex', which is where humans feel the need to fix or save things they deem weak or unable to save themselves. The writer then provides a solution by saying humans need to be an ally to animals and help tell their stories. That's where a journalist can be very beneficial. The article ends by saying "Let us not be voices of the voiceless but to amplify the voices of the silenced." (Species Revolution). Journalists should be the ones to amplify these narratives, yet some news organizations still are not.

**Solution: In the time of the climate crisis, how can journalists best serve as a voice for plants and animals?**

News media has taken its time to begin to cover climate issues. The climate crisis only really started being talked about in 2019. So, what changed? Scientists came out and gave a timeline of how soon humans had before they cause irreversible damage. Wildfires, earthquakes, and hurricanes became more prevalent causing immense damage around the globe. Almost all of these stories covered people losing their houses and the damage to business, infrastructure, and the economy. There was very little converge on the animals that were being displaced or were dying from these catastrophes. In the latter half of 2019 and early 2020, animal perspectives began to be incorporated more, such as the koalas that were threatened by the Australia wildfires.

Journalists Mark Hertsgaard and Kyle Pope decided to do something about the lack of climate crisis coverage in the news. Going off of the reasons they collected that were mentioned earlier, they decided to launch “Covering Climate Change: A New Playbook for a 1.5 Degree World” with help from *The Nation* and *Columbia Journalism Review* and the open invitation for other news organizations to join as well. In a 2019 article titled “The Media is Failing on Climate Change - Here’s How They can do Better Ahead of 2020”, by Emily Holden, she explains the program as “a project aimed at dramatically improving US media coverage of the climate crisis.” (*The Guardian*). The project now has over 200 news organizations that pledged to actively publish more about the climate crisis and refuse to ignore the issue despite the possible setbacks. “Covering Climate Change” focuses on the entirety of climate issues, including human and nonhuman perspectives.

The main face of the climate crisis has been humans. Many sources in this paper have promoted the idea of making the climate crisis focus on animals. The best solution would be a

combination of the two. This can be categorized as the golden mean under care-based ethics. Finding a compromise for both perspectives could be a bit more challenging due to the language barrier, but journalists can act as the voice for the silenced. Justine Calma explains this compromise in her article “Humans vs. Animals: Can the Climate Movement have Both Mascots?”, written for Grist.org. Calma states “some conservationists and environmental advocates don’t think there needs to be a dichotomy between nature and people when it comes to talking about climate change.” (Grist.org). Humans and other plants and animals are experiencing the same effects of climate change. Natural disasters, rising sea levels, and air pollution all affect animals, plants and humans in relatively the same way. Every living species is trying to get away from these problems. Humans can be motivated to do something about climate change on behalf of other species when the idea that we are all similar is promoted. Journalists need to use both humans and animals as the focus of the climate crisis, especially because the same things are happening to the same populations.

On top of the SPJ code of ethics and other guidelines, writing about animals should be handled with respect. Two women saw a gap in guidelines for journalists when covering animals. Dr. Carrie P. Freeman and Dr. Debra Merskin created the website *Animals and Media: A Style Guide for Giving Voice to the Voiceless*. Their mission statement reads: “We created these style guidelines for media practitioners in the professions of journalism [...] to offer concrete guidance for how to cover and represent nonhuman animals in a fair, honest, and respectful manner in accordance with professional ethical principles.” (AnimalsandMedia.org). They also explain how by properly discussing animal issues concerning climate issues, humans will be more motivated to treat animals with “more respect, care, and ecological responsibility.” (AnimalsandMedia.org). Under the tab for 'journalism' on the website, there are different guidelines, reasoning behind the

guidelines, a brief explanation of why journalism is important to animals' issues and amendments to both the AP Stylebook and SPJ guidelines. Freeman and Merskin put the animal perspective first and ensured that journalists have resources to effectively write about animal issues.

### **Conclusion**

I still believe journalism has a long way to go in terms of speaking on behalf of plants and animals. I do agree with my research that journalism has made changes in the way it covers climate issues. Thinking back four years ago, the climate crisis was never talked about. I think it is important that journalists and news organizations are now talking about the climate crisis more frequently and in many different ways. I still think that the animal perspective is left out the majority of the time.

It seems that the only time animals suffering from climate issues is when the animal is cute, or it will tug on the heartstrings of the human audience. Two examples that support my idea are the koalas that were killed from the Australia fires and the giraffe in California that was threatened by the California wildfires. People tend to support the issue when a cute animal is behind the story. There was very little coverage of all the deer that were either killed or threatened by the California wildfires. Another example of this is the movement towards banning plastic straws to save the sea turtles. There has been less coverage of all the other trash in the ocean and all the other sea life or animals that live near the beach that are dying from all the other garbage humans have dumped.

The climate crisis is a complex issue, with many moving parts, many different perspectives, and many hands trying to do different things. It involves politics, activism, science and more, but journalism is the one thing that can connect all of these aspects. Journalism is what can take each narrative, find the facts and distribute it to the public. This is connected to

outcome-based ethics. In the case of the climate crisis, the information being put out into the world must always be the greatest good for the greatest number. This theory must be expanded to include animals as well.

I think journalism has done well in covering the climate issues and all the parts that are intertwined in it. I still believe that they can still do better. There are more resources out there now on how to cover animals and share their perspectives, people just need to write about it. I hope to see more narratives involving the ways animals are affected by climate issues in the future. Nature needs its voice to be heard; journalists are the ones who need to hold the megaphone.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

“Animals and Media - Guidelines for Media Professionals.” *Animals and Media*, <http://www.animalsandmedia.org/main/>. Accessed 1 Mar. 2020.

This website focuses on all the ways journalists should cover animals in different media. It goes in-depth about different guidelines for writing about animals and the most effective strategies for speaking on behalf of animals. This website provides part of an answer in how journalists can speak on behalf of animals and the best way to do that. The website is also relevant because it gives background on the importance of speaking out for animals. It is an interesting source to consider not only for my paper but for my future in journalism. The website gives a very unique perspective on advocacy for animals.

Altay, İbrahim. “The Media’s Approach to Animal Rights.” *Daily Sabah*, 21 Aug. 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/readers-corner/2017/08/21/the-medias-approach-to-animal-rights>.

This opinion article is from a Turkish news website. Its main focus is animal cruelty, but the author also explains how journalists should be the voice for animals. This article also has great insight into the rights of animals and the role a journalist can play to protect those rights. This article provided a new perspective on the way journalists can speak up. It also had a background about how animal issues are perceived in the world. I found this article to have many great quotes and enlightening material.

Freeman, Carrie Packwood, et al. “Giving Voice to the ‘Voiceless.’” *Journalism Studies*, vol. 12, no. 5, Oct. 2011, pp. 590–607. *Taylor and Francis + NEJM*, DOI:[10.1080/1461670X.2010.540136](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2010.540136).

The focus of this journal article is how journalists should cover animals with respect to their "nonhuman" experience. It explains everything from the ethics behind animal issues to the obligation media has towards other species. This article connects to my topic very well because its main focus is ethics and how animals are covered and portrayed in media. I found the ideas in this article to be very compelling and a beneficial source in the issues surrounding how animals and their rights are viewed in the way journalists write.

Hertsgaard, Mark, and Kyle Pope. *A New Beginning for Climate Reporting*. Sept. 2019. [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com), <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/climate-change-journalism/>.

This article was about the work *The Nation* did in promoting climate coverage. It explained how there was a lack of coverage in news media about the climate crisis. The article went into detail explaining some of the reasons why news outlets were not reporting on climate issues. The information in this article provided background for my research by explaining where journalists were lacking in climate coverage.

Holden, Emily. "The Media Is Failing on Climate Change – Here's How They Can Do Better Ahead of 2020." *The Guardian*, 30 Apr. 2019. [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/30/what-will-it-take-for-the-media-to-focus-on-climate-change-in-the-2020-elections>.

In this article, the writer gives background to the climate change issue and how media is not doing its part. Later in the article, she asked experts how media can best cover the climate issue, to which they provided four main guidelines. This article is more closely related to climate change, politics and how journalists should cover the combination of the two. The information from this article supports my topic by provided more ways journalists can use their voice for the environment. I found this information interesting especially as it connected to politics and how journalists can hold politicians to a standard when it comes to climate change.

"Humans vs. Animals: Can the Climate Movement Have Both Mascots?" *Grist*, 22 Apr. 2019, <https://grist.org/article/humans-vs-animals-can-the-climate-movement-have-both-mascots/>.

This article is about using animals and humans as a way to motivate people about climate change, specifically in nature documentaries. The main focus of climate change is human needs. This forces people to recognize their role in climate issues, but it also eliminates some of the concern for other species.

This is relevant to my topic because it proves the idea that humans have neglected the animal aspect of the climate crisis. It also provides a solution for humans in how to be better for other animal species. I enjoyed how this article pointed out the problem and provided a solution.

"The Media Are Complacent While the World Burns." *Columbia Journalism Review*, [https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/climate-change-media.php/](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/climate-change-media.php/). Accessed 7 Mar. 2020.

This article covers the launch of "Covering Climate Change: A New Playbook for a 1.5-Degree World" by *The Nation* and CJR. The focus of the project is to improve how the media in the United States covers the climate crisis. This article also goes into detail about the issues from

new media in the past and how they can be better. It also explains how this is an issue that affects everyone; therefore, the coverage must be everywhere, not just a few big news outlets. I think this article is very important because it connects all of the other sources, especially the other ones that discussed this plan.

*Voice for the Voiceless* | *Species Revolution*. 27 Oct. 2017,  
<https://www.speciesrevolution.org/2017/10/27/you-arent-a-voice-for-the-voiceless/>.

This article is about how human's speciesism has caused all the issues for animals that we must now "speak up" for. The article's main focus is on how every perception of other animals by humans enables our speciesism even more. This article is relevant to my topic because it provides a different perspective on helping give a voice to the voiceless. This article also gives examples of how to help animals and speak out in an effective way, which is what I want to focus on. I enjoy this article and find it very interesting. Out of all my research so far, this was the only article that challenged human speciesism and called out all the problems they have caused.