More than melting glaciers: 
Making climate change meaningful

Doyle, Julie (2011), Mediating Climate Change, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing; 182 pp.

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Mediating Climate Change begins with author Julie Doyle standing on a sidewalk in the UK in 1997, trying to convince passers-by of the dangers of climate change. She is aided by beautiful photographs of dolphins, seals, seabirds and coral whose pristine habitat is at risk from oil exploration in the Atlantic Ocean. The difficult part, Doyle reflects, is showing how these beautiful photographs and the act of burning fossil fuels are linked to global warming: ‘The recurrent response from the public is that they cannot see it, so therefore it cannot be happening’ (p. 1). Signalling Doyle’s interest in the topic both as a Greenpeace activist and as an academic, the anecdote also serves to introduce one of the central tenets of the book: that the foregrounding of geographically or temporally distant images of non-human nature in mediated representations of climate change have undermined the need for action in the present and detracted attention from the impacts on human populations, particularly in developing countries. Doyle argues that climate change needs to be made more ‘temporally, spatially and socially meaningful and relevant’ (p. 8) to people by breaking down the barriers that separate humans from nature and framing the problem no longer simply as an environmental issue, but as a humanitarian one.

In this regard, Doyle usefully breaks from earlier studies that have viewed the barriers to the effective communication of climate change as the same as those for other environmental problems—namely, that it does not fit with traditional news values because it evolves slowly over time, its impacts are mostly seen in distant geographical locations and it tends not to relate to specific events (McManus 2000; Russell 2008; Wilson 2000). While Doyle acknowledges that these issues have indeed constrained media coverage and prevented engaging communication campaigns about climate change, she concludes that this is largely due to a reliance on scientific definitions of the problem that are, by nature, uncertain and grounded in abstract records of temperature rise and ice melt in distant regions. Doyle proposes that as time has progressed and the social impacts of climate change have come to be understood alongside the environmental ones, new opportunities have arisen for climate change to be reconceptualised beyond the boundaries of the environmental movement and the human/nature divide.

Mediating Climate Change is divided into two sections. The first section (Chapters 1 to 3) focuses on institutional and political factors that have historically informed definitions and representations of climate change in the areas of science, environmentalism and the media. Chapter 1 provides a theoretical
overview of techno-scientific constructions of climate change, arguing that the uncertainties of climate modelling and the temporal disjunction between past causes and future effects have distanced the problem from its human causes and impacts, particularly when these scientific framings are integrated into media and environmentalist discourses. Chapter 2 provides the empirical support for this contention in the form of a series of case studies of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, BBC television documentaries and Greenpeace campaigns from 1990 to 2007. Doyle argues that a reliance on the visual—whether through graphs and tables or through images of nature in decline—has reinforced the divide between the environment and humans. Chapter 3 offers a brief summary of the representational problems climate change has posed for meaning and understanding, in preparation for an analysis of more recent efforts to overcome these barriers in the following chapters.

The second section (Chapters 4 to 7) analyses the strategies used by NGOs and media institutions in contemporary campaigns to make climate change meaningful and encourage (or discourage) mitigating action. Chapter 4 maps a shift away from environmental framings towards an emerging climate movement focusing greater attention on the humanitarian and social impacts of the issue through appeals to morality, justice and faith. The chapter analyses the campaigns of three diverse NGOs: the Catholic faith-based aid agency CAFOD, the grassroots environmental and social justice activist group Friends of the Earth International, and the sustainable living model Camp for Climate Action. Chapter 5 presents a critical analysis of the coverage of the 2009 Copenhagen climate change conference (COP15) in UK newspapers. Chapter 6 again turns to NGO campaigns, this time considering the previously overlooked role of meat production and consumption in climate change mitigation efforts through three campaigns: Paul McCartney’s Meat Free Monday, PETA2’s (the youth wing of PETA) Meat’s Not Green, and Friends of the Earth UK’s The Food Chain campaign. Chapter 7 reflects briefly on ways that art can be used to engage people on climate change, drawing on Doyle’s personal reactions to a series of climate change themed exhibitions and her own project produced in collaboration with a visual artist.

The decision to analyse such a broad range of campaigns is clearly linked to Doyle’s call for new modes of representing climate change beyond the environmental, yet is also one that inherently limits its own potential by allowing less space for in-depth analyses. One particular limitation of Doyle’s approach is that it is focused on output, and the internal aims, structure and resources of the organisations are not addressed. When Doyle critiques Friends of the Earth’s The Food Chain campaign, for example, she argues that although the campaign very effectively exposes the concerning social and environmental impacts of the meat industry in the UK, which is reliant upon the exploitation of native resources and local communities in South America, it fails to question the commodification of animals for meat as a whole. This is framed as a failing by Friends of the Earth, and does not consider that, desiring to reach as wide an audience as possible, the organisation may have decided to take the pragmatic step of not urging the
abandonment of all meat production (which, as Doyle herself aptly demonstrates, is closely linked to culture and deeply entrenched ideas of status and identity) but of working to improve processes within the existing system. A closer look at the purpose and strategy of the campaign, perhaps through interviews with organisations, may have enhanced the discussion at this level.

A strength of the book, on the other hand, is the detailed and insightful analysis that Doyle offers of the techno-scientific methods and technologies used to quantify and define climate change in line with the practice of science in Western developed economies (pp. 33–8). Doyle explores how climate science, typically invoked by journalists, politicians and campaigners alike to assert the ‘truth’ or reality of climate change, is deeply influenced by socio-political and institutional factors governing, for example, the availability and development of advanced computer technologies needed to produce accurate climate models. This theme is referred to throughout the book, but is explored to greatest effect in the chapter on UK print media coverage of COP15. Doyle analyses coverage of COP15 in the context of the so-called ‘Climategate’ incident, in which sceptics claimed that emails stolen from the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia proved that human contributions to climate change had been exaggerated. Doyle finds that The Guardian, The Independent and the Daily Mirror all ‘explicitly assert a discourse of scientific rationality and scientific authority through the certainties of human induced climate change to support policy action’ (p. 113), reinforcing the official United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) message that the consensus position was not threatened by the emails. However, Doyle finds that The Times also assigns absolute authority to climate scientists, but to opposite effect. Emphasising the alleged inaccuracies and cover-ups in the emails, The Times places responsibility and blame upon the climate scientists, who are inaccurately charged with claiming that the science is settled. The voices of sceptics are thus presented as the rational alternative to misleading scientists. For Doyle, the approaches adopted by The Times, as well as the other newspapers, are inadequate as they present climate science as a ‘depoliticised “truth”’ (p. 121) in which scientific consensus is wrongly conflated with scientific certainty, and science is ambitiously assumed to be free of the socio-political factors that influence other disciplines. In this vein, Doyle views COP15 as a missed opportunity ‘to properly explain the uncertainties which underpin climate science, but which do not themselves negate the consensus of climate science’ (p. 122). While the analysis in this chapter may have been enhanced by a discussion of the role of political economy in determining the positions adopted by each newspaper (e.g. that The Times belongs to Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited empire, which has adopted a strongly ideological stance on climate change [McKnight 2010]), the chapter does usefully highlight how downplaying the uncertainty of climate science in attempts to endorse the consensus and encourage assertive action can in fact hinder mitigation efforts and be exploited by climate sceptics.

In summary, Mediating Climate Change provides a worthwhile introduction to the expanding field of media studies of climate change, and one that
advantageously abandons the framing of climate change as a purely environmental issue in favour of an approach that considers human angles and the efforts of a wide range of activist groups as well as mainstream media. As Doyle concludes, ‘In letting go of nature, as it has come to be constructed through western knowledge systems, we can hope to connect and engage with climate change in a way that acknowledges its embeddedness in our everyday lives, encouraging a change in our perceptions and our actions’ (p. 158). The question of whether increased public engagement with climate change is enough is a question for another time and place.

References