

# Local Community Climate Activism, Television and Social Change

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*Communities are often more willing to take direct action to tackle climate change than politicians are (Buky 2020). If the shift to sustainable futures is to happen, local communities need to be empowered and supported to do more. In this article, we examine how this can happen on the basis of research conducted in Liverpool, UK. We show that collaboration between community groups and reporting by local media can be fundamental in enabling the groups to continue their work. Collaboration facilitates the sharing of scarce resources provided for climate change, while the local media can inform local residents not just about what community groups are doing, but also provide the validation for the work that local residents are doing, thus motivating them to keep up their work for the environment.*

KEY WORDS: Climate change, local communities, local media, climate action, television

## Introduction

A recent special issue of *Social Alternatives* on 'Global Emergency' (2020) examined 'Forty Years of Failed Australian Climate Policy'. It emphasised the need for climate action in the face of rising emissions and warming temperatures which several contributors (Buky 2020; Hil 2020) named as having the potential to lead to the extinction of the human species. In addition, several contributors indicated the lack of meaningful action, particularly by successive Australian governments but also other policy makers and citizens (Lowe 2020; Stevens 2020; English and Baldwin 2020). Anthony Giddens (2009:2) described this in his self-named paradox:

since the dangers of global warming aren't tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day-to-day life, [...] many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before being stirred to serious action will, by definition, be too late.

Giddens's description of the paradox seems to describe an unwilling populace, a point emphasised by his opening remarks on 'why does anyone [...] continue to drive an SUV?' (2009:1) which draws attention to everyday individual behaviour and therefore frames the need for action against climate change through a neoliberal lens. What the contributions in the special issue of *Social Alternatives* in contrast make evident, is that the populace is often more willing to take action against climate change than politicians. In the words of Michael Buky (2020:14): 'With the uptake of renewable

energy led by households, the Federal Government has done little to promote it.' It seems, as time is running out to address climate change, a different approach than looking for leadership from policy makers is required.

This article will examine if local community climate action, when it is given a platform through local television (and other media), can be an arbiter of change. It will draw on evidence collated in Liverpool, UK, where the researchers worked with a small community interest company, Love Wavertree. It will discuss changing attitudes in the community in relation to climate action as a result of a number of television programs made about local community climate action. A key focus in that regard will be affective changes evident in citizen responses as well as a shift towards an approach of collaboration as a result of increasing awareness of different community groups. Thus, we will in many ways continue the work of Kathryn English and Claudia Baldwin (2020) who examined how 'Emotions Influence Community Advocacy'. We will begin by laying out some of the research conducted on how to motivate the public to act against climate change before discussing the specific case study of Liverpool: first, local government responses to climate change and citizens' perceptions of these responses, second, local community activism, and finally the role of television in enabling a more positive outlook.

## How to Inspire Climate Action? A Key Question for Climate Research

Much scientific research on climate change draws a stark picture of the potential future if climate change isn't

addressed (Lovejoy et al. 2019; Orr 2016). As a result, a whole area of research has emerged that ponders how people can be encouraged to be more proactive in working against climate change or at least reduce their own contribution to it. The media are seen as instrumental in communicating the effects of and motivate people to take action against climate change (Braasch 2013; English and Baldwin 2020). Other researchers, such as Sissel Furuseth et al. (2020), point to the helpfulness of having a more holistic approach to culture, as is the case in Norway, where film and television are considered amongst other cultural outputs such as literature and where industry bodies have emerged to guide creatives, to support a behavioural shift towards greater sustainability.

As Furuseth et al. also describe, much of the narratives in Norwegian film, television and literature are dominated by a sense of doom and gloom, connecting stories of climate change with a sense of dread. This is quite typical for media representations which tend to 'portray climate change as causing widespread and potentially catastrophic impacts' (English and Baldwin 2020). As several researchers have found, however, such representation can lead to climate denial (Norgaard 2011) and apathy and helplessness (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2003). Indeed, English and Baldwin suggest that 'negative emotions such as fear may be counter-productive if the goal is to motivate the public to address climate change' (2009:32).

English and Baldwin set against it the positive emotions they found were generated in the community work of board members of the Noosa Biosphere Reserve in Queensland, Australia. They argue that community engagement could become key in motivating wider climate action. Similarly, Frederico Martellozzo et al. (2019) point to the role of community-led initiatives to a) support the transition to net zero and b) engage a wider populace in the transition to more sustainable lifestyles. These findings are backed up by other research, including Enrique Del Acebo Ibáñez and Mariano Costa (2019) who show that young inhabitants in Buenos Aires and San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina, are more willing to alter their behaviour if they feel a sense of rootedness in the local community. Contact with others, a sense of belonging and a shared sense of purpose thus seem important in motivating people to act. As Jale Tosun and Jonas Schoenefeld (2017) indicate, it may indeed be the wish for collective action that motivates people to become engaged in such citizen initiatives which, in a networked governance that combines transnational organisations, national governments and local civic societies as well as corporations and businesses, will be important to deliver on reducing carbon emissions (see also Bond 2009).

Many of the researchers on community initiatives emphasise the importance of locality in their discussions.

Drawing on existing research, Meghan Bond (2009: 215), for example argues that:

Many drivers of adaptation, such as geographical, political and social conditions differ from place to place and even within place. Therefore, commentators point to cities, local authorities and communities as being key players in facilitating and/or coordinating climate action, and creating innovative locally suited responses.

A place-sensitive approach is therefore important not just to mitigate climate change but also to engage citizens on the basis of what is needed locally. Importantly, such a focus on the local is also useful in media representations of climate change: we have seen a significant shift, in the last few years, in television narratives on specific locales such as the Ceredigion region in Wales in *Hinterland/Y Gwyll* (S4C, BBC, 2013-2016, see Noonan and McElroy 2019) as well as an increased international circulation of narratives from across the world which has led American scholar Timothy Havens (2018) to argue that high-end television drama is now marked by 'conspicuous localism'. Such a focus on the specifically local also goes along with ideas of the small-scale which Gary Braasch (2013) suggests as a solution to the problem of inspiring climate action through imagery. As he writes:

More pictures are needed of specific solutions and adaptations that will shape the world of tomorrow. The future is here. [...] images of a neighbourhood of homes with local wind generation, solar panels, electric cars, gardens, and attractive public transit may encourage people to work toward positive goals (2013:38).

To examine this further, we now move on to discuss research conducted in the city of Liverpool, UK. In Liverpool's suburb of Wavertree, the researchers first distributed questionnaires amongst a local community before interviewing some participants in more depth. Our main goal at this stage was to glean what participants already knew about climate change and where they had gained that knowledge. The questionnaires were also used as a recruitment tool for a series of four climate assemblies that were organised around the key themes of housing, transport, food and business. These assemblies were filmed and transformed into a series of four half-hour television programs. In addition, we filmed four 10-minute programs about local community groups. These were then screened locally in a venue as well as being distributed online via YouTube. Finally, the screening was followed by another questionnaire which gave us an understanding of how the programs were understood and what role such programs may play in motivating people to take

climate action. As we discuss the project, we will first lay out existing climate policy in Liverpool and how our participants perceived it.

### **Climate Emergency: Declaration, Action and Perception**

In 2019, as English and Baldwin (2020:26) highlight, a climate emergency was declared by a number of countries and local governments across the world 'making the commitment to take action to address the causes and impacts of climate change'. Amongst the declarants was the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCR) as well as all of its six councils (St Helen's, Knowsley, Halton, Sefton, Wirral and Liverpool City Council (LCC)). The LCR, which is home to approximately 1.6 million inhabitants, faces a number of challenges, including significant levels of deprivation, including 62,000 children living in poverty while 'the 2019 Index for Multiple Deprivation scores for Knowsley and Liverpool are second and third in the North West of England' (Public Health Institute 2021). In addition, Liverpool City Council has seen significant budget cuts as a result of the Conservative Government's austerity measures. Other challenges that the area faces are environmental: some predictions point to the likelihood of several communities being submerged or at risk of regular flooding by 2050 unless emissions are curbed (Climate Central 2021) requiring potential measures such as the development of flood defences and/or coordination of rehousing.

The declaration of the climate emergency has led to concrete policy documents and pledges to become net zero by 2040 (LCR) and 2030 (LCC) respectively. The long-term strategy *Pathway to Net Zero* by the LCR was published in 2019 and sets out the strategic vision of achieving this goal across the thematic areas of housing, transport work and neighbourhoods. This includes the development of green skills and training, reducing consumption, particularly of energy, increasing the use of public transport, cycling and walking, encouraging people to change behaviour and ensuring that this transition is fair, thus recognising the significant disparity in resources available to different segments of the region's population. In the same year, Liverpool City Council declared it wanted to become the first net zero city in 2030 (LCC 2022). The strategic plan that aims to deliver on this goal emphasises emissions in relation to buildings and heat, power supply, transport and waste. Concurrently, the plan also recognises the challenges posed by the impacts of climate change. The *City Plan* (LCC 2022) makes evident the wish to work across community, voluntary, public and private sectors to deliver on health, education, neighbourhoods, economy, culture and climate.

While both of these plans are ambitious and suggest that Liverpool City and Region are at the forefront of

combating climate change, these perceptions have not filtered through to local residents. Several respondents to our initial survey only named the planting of wildflower meadows as a strategy adopted by Liverpool City Council. Such a wildflower meadow had noticeably transformed the local park, called 'The Mystery' in local vernacular, which had hitherto largely consisted of big stretches of lawn to facilitate sports play. Another respondent (62), who only ticked 'have declared a climate emergency' wrote in a text box: 'I am sure the council [sic] will claim it has done some of the above but the effects will be minimal and the actions are not wide reaching enough. Traffic, consumption and the way money moves are clear signs that the above is fiddling while Rome burns.' Similar sentiments were expressed by other respondents and the interviewees.

The interviews also revealed a more troubling perception, namely that Liverpool City Council is not just not doing enough, but is perceived to be actively unhelpful. This became evident in Ihmad's (pseudonym) interview. He describes his involvement in different community groups in Liverpool in the following terms:

So I got the locals, you know, "Come on, let's do something, let's do something". And then worked very hard getting – it's very, very hard, you know, when you go to Liverpool City Council, you go to other organisations. They say, "What are you talking about?" I said "Well we have to get this garden going". [But none of them offered help]. So I got the local school children involved, they came planting daffodils.

As in the case of Australia (Buky 2020), Ihmad here describes an active populace who is transforming their local communities through gardening projects. In contrast, local government, here the LCC, is perceived to be unhelpful to the point that innovative ways of problem solving (by involving local school children) are required to push the project forward. When asked about why he believes the local council to be unhelpful, he pointed to the fact that the environment didn't appear as a priority – rather it was employment. This points to a potential problem for climate communication, one that we want to come back to later, namely that environmental issues continue to be communicated as one-item topics when they are actually deeply enmeshed with other issues such as health, employment, economy, social justice and education. What we want to suggest instead is that any communication about the environment should emphasise other benefits including to employment, health etc.

Another interviewee, Sean (pseudonym), similarly expressed a frustration with the local council. Sean could be understood to be an 'exclusive informant' (Bruun 2016)

as like the industry workers Hanne Bruun interviewed for her study of Danish television, Sean had worked for Liverpool City Council in the recent past. Comparing his experience there with that of working at another council, he felt the attitude across the city was one of competition – competing in particular for scarce funding resources. In contrast, he argued, other councils were more collaborative, finding ways of sharing these scarce resources and indeed banding together to make the resources stretch further. While this is based on subjective experience and cannot be corroborated, it is important to point out that the existing structures and systems at LCC have been more widely criticised. Liverpool City Council struggles with its existing systems that have been perceived not just as inefficient but as wasteful and at points corrupt, leading to significant oversight by the national administration (Badshah, 2022).

Overall then, it is clear that although Liverpool City Council and City Region have put in place the policy framework to work towards a more sustainable future, local citizens do not yet have a sense that this policy framework has any consequences on their lived experiences. And as informants as Sean make visible, in part the actions by local government cannot be delivered because the local systems in place operate against them. In order to counteract these systemic problems, therefore, alternative ways of tackling local issues are required. For the time being, it seems, in Liverpool, these are delivered by local community groups.

### **Local Community-led Climate Action**

Like many other cities and regions, Liverpool City Region is home to a number of subgroups of national and international activist groups such as Friends of the Earth and Extinction Rebellion. In addition, there are a number of other groups focused on tracking and supporting action against climate change, including the National Biobank, Friends of Parks Groups and Scouseflowers, a wildflower project originating from the National Wildflower Centre in Court Hey Park that closed in 2017. However, beyond these relatively big and established groups and organisations exist a number of micro-local groups who often operate without funding and on a purely voluntary basis. It is to the four projects that were filmed as part of the television program series *Love Wavertree Community Climate Action* (2022) that we now want to turn. Due to issues of space, we want to focus on one group in particular, while quickly mentioning the others: they are, first, Wavertree Garden Suburb in Bloom, a group dedicated to look after local green spaces, plant them up to increase biodiversity and combat climate change through carbon capture; second, LitterClear, a litter picking group which takes on local community spaces, cleans them from litter as well as refurbishing furniture such as

benches, bins and signage and third, Aigburth Community Cycle Club which organises guided cycle rides across Liverpool in order to encourage more people to take up active travel.

The fourth group is Love Wavertree itself. A Community Interest Company (CIC) it was set up in 2019 after a series of reports in the local and national press that suggested the area of Wavertree and in particular its historic high street had fallen into decline. Instead, local residents wanted to draw attention to the assets that existed, which included a strong sense of community. In 2020, Love Wavertree launched its shop, which is home to the food club at the centre of focus of the program. As we will show, Love Wavertree, in line with the other community groups combine a variety of interests including community work and the fight for social justice with action on climate change.

The food club reuses out-of-date food from local supermarkets which is collected by the charity FareShare who distributes the food waste from local shops to different charities across the UK, including across Merseyside. Love Wavertree substitutes this food which is largely dry food with fresh food that it buys with money raised from the charity shop. Members of the food club can come to collect ten items (worth approximately thirteen pounds) for three pound fifty. Thus, the food club also makes available cheap food at a time of a cost-of-living crisis. At the time of writing (February 2023), approximately 300 members were signed up, most of whom struggle to feed themselves or their families. This was perceived as 'helping you out' as one contributor to the film put it. In addition, the food club becomes an opportunity to gather for the community and where further help (for example in relation to housing) can be organised, as the director of Love Wavertree, Will Chambers, made clear.

What the food club makes visible is that climate change is deeply connected to other issues: here to food poverty and community. Food waste contributes significantly to climate change through the emission of different greenhouse gasses including methane and carbon. In 2013, a global report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (2013:6) estimated that if food waste were a country, it would be the third largest emitter of carbon dioxide. By reducing the food waste from local shops and redistributing it across the city, FareShare with the help of Love Wavertree contributes to the reduction of the carbon and methane footprint. This benefits the local community also financially: Wavertree, like the rest of the city of Liverpool, struggles with poverty and multiple levels of deprivation. Thus the 'extension of the life cycle' of food, as our interviewee, Will Chambers, suggested, fundamentally redresses both social and environmental problems. On top of this, the weekly food club has become

a local meeting point for the local community, providing mental and emotional support.

Overall, the four micro-local community groups all in their own unique ways supported a more sustainable way of living by encouraging and supporting local communities to take small steps to climate action: reducing food waste, gardening, reducing litter and using active travel. But each project delivered these sustainable goals in tandem with others: reducing food poverty, creating community, giving a sense of pride into the local area and community and supporting the wellbeing of the local community. Researchers such as Florence Margai (2012: 4) point to the fact that 'the poor and underrepresented groups are too often the ones to bear the brunt of environmental hazards, the most likely to develop health complications from these exposures, and yet the least likely to gain access to beneficial health services that would detect and treat these problems', pointing to the fact that environmental disparities go hand in hand with those of social justice. It is, however, similarly important to stress that environmental solutions go along with other benefits, such as the reduction in health and food disparities, as well as the fostering of stronger communities. Indeed, we found that these three aspects – climate justice, community and social justice – were three deeply interconnected branches of a sustainable community which needed to be addressed and tackled at the same time to help local communities to flourish. Importantly, the community groups we introduced above provided this, thus leading the way towards more sustainable futures.

### Television as Amplifier and Motivator

While the groups delivered on sustainability and other goals, it became clear that they couldn't do it by themselves: many of the founders, directors or leaders of the group expressed a sense of concern that their model of working wasn't sustainable simply because they couldn't resource it properly. This included resources in terms of material and equipment, but mostly of people. The materials could often be purchased through funds that were made available through philanthropic means: for example, Love Wavertree gained support from a local business and from a charity auction to pay for some of additional food bought for the food club, while LitterClear gained funding from a regular event focused on raising monies for local community activities to buy some of the equipment required to pick litter and restore outdoor furniture. However, the resource of people became a bigger issue, and one which feeds back to the question of how to get more people involved in climate action.

Considering these findings, it is interesting to examine how local media were perceived by our participants: no one could remember stories about climate change in the

local press or local radio. *The Guardian* and the BBC were perceived to be the key distributors of information and education about climate change. Both of these operate nationally, thus providing little space for local initiatives. The dominant local newspaper, *Liverpool Echo*, has proven itself little interested in climate stories, rejecting several that local journalists had pitched. As a result, participants saw climate stories as not connected to their specific locale. This affected what groups knew about each other: members of LitterClear, for example, had heard about Love Wavertree but didn't know how to contact them, while few had yet heard of LitterClear and the Wavertree Garden Suburb in Bloom groups. Finding out about each other was thus perceived as a key positive outcome of our project for the participants of the groups and led to greater collaboration, enabling mutual support.

Importantly, the element of information was also perceived as a positive outcome for other members of the public who were not yet involved in any of the actions. Those who filled in the post-screening questionnaire and were not yet involved in any of the groups highlighted again and again that finding out about the groups and finding out about the small things they did to tackle climate change helped them to understand what they themselves could do. All participants who filled in the post-screening questionnaire made clear that they experienced some form of positive emotion as a result of seeing the work being done. Words such as 'positive', 'inspired' and 'energy' abounded in the responses.

In line with English and Baldwin (2020) this suggests the role that local community engagement has in motivating others to become involved. But the problem of the resource of people also makes evident that community engagement alone isn't enough to motivate people to become involved in climate action: by themselves, the groups' work is too small-scale and does not attract enough people. What is required are stories and communication about the positive work these groups do in the local media to spread the word and help build momentum for these groups. Unfortunately, the existing local media, including the *Echo*, but also the local television channel Liverpool TV, did not run stories about the groups, but rather focused on established organisations, including the Council, the courts, the police and other rescue services to fill their pages and airtime. Importantly, our programs which essentially were short documentary introductions to the groups, all indicated the number of benefits that the action brought to the community, including those relating to social and community aspects such as the cost-of-living crisis, a sense of belonging and physical and mental health, thus emphasising that climate action was deeply interconnected with positive action in other areas. This overall positive emphasis spread over to viewer perception with one viewer on YouTube commenting 'Just

brilliant'. In addition to these positive emotions in viewers, participants in the programs also felt validated by being observed by cameras, thus sustaining their motivation too. Thus, local media, such as television, play a crucial part in supporting the efforts of the local community to tackle climate change.

## Conclusions

Our project, focused on the case study of Liverpool, examined the role of local communities in creating sustainable futures and tackling climate change. It showed that local community engagement in Liverpool is clearly central in tackling climate change and seems at the moment, in line with previous findings (Buky 2020; English and Baldwin 2020), more effective than other sectors within the networked governance Tosun and Schoenefeld (2017) describe. However, for these civic societies and community groups to motivate more people they need the support of local media to spread information with positive stories that can inspire others. Thus, it is precisely the small-scale, positive changes that Braasch (2013) argued media needed to show, that media stories about local community efforts can create. Importantly, by telling more stories about the positive example such community groups set, local media may well inspire more local politicians to take their pledges to tackle climate change seriously and deliver tangible policy which our participants currently found wanting.

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## Yogi, the Supersonic Bear

21st March 1962

The musk of bear sweat overpowered even the jet fuel's waft that swamped your nose's delicate gauge. The pall of wintering in a cave's stomach; all those pent-up gases which ancient tunnels vented in their sandstone wisdom were present cruising at 30,000 feet. Who would choose a bear to eject? Your eyes' altimeter rolled back into your head; drugged up, your tongue pushed to the side of your great jaws, a slavering mess as after a raid. You went as a cork from a champagne bottle, the boulder-sized capsule nested you in the winter of your hibernation. For seven minutes you floated down, a bear god; one of the first living creatures to descend from paradise. The landing didn't kill you, only science's rush as doctors opened your furry stomach – like bomb-bay doors over a city.

B. R. DIONYSIUS

## Modern Muses

*"... the truest poetry is the most feigning..." As You Like It. 3.3.20-21*

Cherie flicks away, and puffs away  
a wisp of her wind-tangled hair  
— fan-driven wind, but never mind,  
it expresses and presses her lips,  
her cheeks to kiss the air.  
Her sleek eyes half-closed  
she's pretty and unique.

Monique struts down  
the catwalk, so chic,  
putting one foot exactly  
where the other just was:  
no-one in their right mind  
would walk like this  
but it makes her hips swivel  
and her half-naked  
breasts fetchily bobble.  
She's so pretty and unique.

Smooth, "super curvy" Sophie  
wears an oblique bikini  
that's hardly there,  
her bum no longer covered  
but fully on display.  
She influences Hic Hoc, Dickery Dock  
and has more followers than Jesus:  
who once were poster pin-ups  
now sweetly move on YouTube.

Clear skinned Marisa, a "legend"  
— never mind the names,  
they're all as reliable as spies —  
eyes you sneakily  
over her dazzling bare shoulder,  
powdered, long eye-lashed,  
daring you, and unique.

As temporary as youth,  
all their skills are visible;  
they have perhaps a decade  
to captivate men's eyes  
and some women's too. Yet  
you, and everyone knows  
that off camera they'll all  
get off their tuffets,

dress down and go back  
into their shopping,  
burping and sleeping lives.  
It's all make-believe. And it works:  
our gene-driven stupidity  
being as hard-wired as desire.

DENNIS HASKELL