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Adrienne Russell, **The Mediated Climate: How Journalists, Big Tech, and Activists Are Vying for Our Future,** New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023, 272 pp., $35.00 (paperback).

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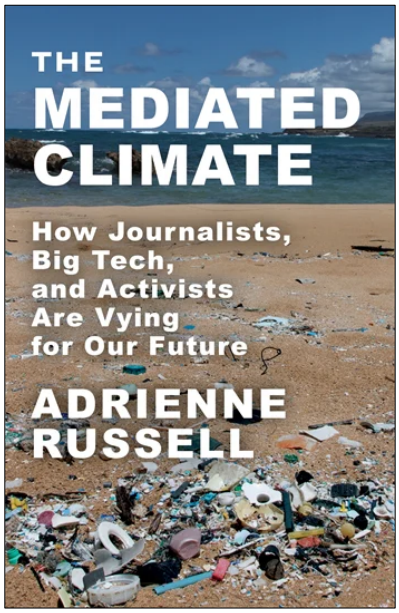

It is January, and the Californian wildfires are raging. Terrible images dominate the news. It is winter in California and summer in Australia, from where I write. In both hemispheres, fires consume homes still decorated with Christmas cheer. Media provide endless incoherences. Seasons are broken; all is ruptured. In an emotional exchange, actor James Wood tells CNN: "One day you're swimming in the pool and the next day, it's all gone" (Shanfeld, 2025). His words epitomize how power and privilege are flattened by the climate crisis. Others likened the devastation to being "like a third-world country," reminding us that the affluent have long assumed the less-affluent will bear the brunt of environmental injustice.

Reading Adrienne Russell's ***The Mediated Climate: How Journalists, Big Tech, and Activists Are Vying for Our Future*** focused my attention on the importance of journalism to not only connect extreme weather events to the climate emergency but to inspire action rather than hopelessness. Alas, it is not so simple. Studies have shown that connecting extreme weather to climate risks can decrease support for victims and adaptation efforts in the United States (e.g., Hai & Perlman, 2022) and Europe (e.g., Wappenhans, Valentim, Klüver, & Stoetzer, 2024). Such observations point to failures in the normative ideal of news media as an intermediary between the governed and those governing. Rather than asking what media can do to improve its coverage of climate problems, Russell instead examines contemporary media environments to find the source of the apparent disconnect.

Drawing from ideas at the intersections of anthropology, political science, and communication—so, Benedict Anderson, Naomi Oreskes, and Shoshana Zuboff and others—Russell locates the relevance of media to some of the questions raised by the climate emergency. Tellingly, she asks: Should we expect journalists or journalism to win the battle against the information wildfire we are living through? (p. 65). For Russell, environmental pollution and information pollution are one and the same, literally and symbolically. Subtitled *How Journalists, Big Tech, And Activists Are Vying For Our Future,* Russell's contribution demonstrates the ways in which "the contemporary information crisis is driven not just by technological changes but also by concentrated and unaccountable power" (p. 5).

Tracing the intersecting history of the climate crisis and the information crisis, Russell argues that the networked efforts to stymy action on climate is part of "the decades-long effort to undermine trust not only in science and journalism, but in all liberal democratic institutions" (p. 62). Russell describes the ascent of Bezos, Musk, and Zuckerberg to be grounded not in their technical or business acumen but in America's

particular privileging of individual speech rights over collective rights, of private gain over public good. In other words, the Silicon Valley technocrats have gamed a system that originally understood freedom to mean the independence of the individual from the tyrannies of power. Written before Trump's second inauguration, Russell critically describes the cultural landscape that elevated Elon Musk to White House superinfluencer. To address improving climate communication, Russell argues, is not just about repackaging messages but rather how we conceive of—and regulate—power, especially in relation to media.

In a comprehensive introduction, Russell gets non-media scholars up to speed on the basics of journalism studies, starting with the orthodox understandings of journalism and its preoccupations with objectivity before heading into the disruptions caused by the digital revolution that bought new platforms, players, and practices to newsrooms and audiences. This section usefully works to locate the idea of media as a dynamic space constituted by platforms, technologies and affordances, industries and networks, business logics and professional traditions, and individual practices and logics. Having laid the groundwork to describe the disruption to the social, economic, and political structures that have led to massive shifts in journalism, Russell critically examines how media corporations, journalists and other media professionals, tech companies, and activists continue to shape how we understand the climate crisis.

From this robust introduction, the book is divided into four chapters. In "House on Fire," Russell extends her gaze into the long history of propaganda, public relations, and misinformation, touching base with key moments—namely tobacco—to demonstrate how confusion and inaction can be manufactured by vested interests. Beyond the dirty tricks of public relations, she describes how our communication networks are increasingly flooded with lies, falsehoods, and misinformation. Slow to respond to a changing landscape, Russell describes how organizational priorities and professional practices led journalism to become a tool of climate-change denial amplification, forcing "the stubborn profession" to evolve in response to newer players doing a better job of communication. Some may not appreciate this suggestion. Then again, few would argue against the assertion that news business models are stacked against news stories that do not attract the advertising revenue that pays for their work. If anything, this chapter serves to dampen the myths and assumptions about media and communication—that truth always prevails and better information is always more convincing—to set up the answer to the question: Can we expect journalists to win the battle against the information wildfire we are living through?

In the next chapter, "Noise, Incivility, and Ambivalence," Russell challenges assumptions that good information will prevail by examining what the information-deficit model (shared by both science communication and journalism) overlooks. It provides background on the historical relationship between publics and media infrastructures, and the changing dynamics of this relationship, to present the larger context in which journalism operates. By detailing three characteristics of online communication—noise, incivility, and ambivalence—Russell sets up the terrain to explore how journalists and civil society activists are subverting the intentional distractions, which she explores in the chapter, "After Peak Indifference." Focusing on the Fridays for Future and No Dakota Access Pipeline movements, she explores the ways activists are reframing climate and information pollution as a matter of human rights and justice rather than science and technology. Locating the struggles for climate justice as struggles for media and data justice sets up the final chapter, "Collective Imaginary," which calls for rethinking liberalism's focus on individual freedoms and a return to privileging the public interest over private profit.

The Mediated Climate joins an increasing number of books tackling the hijacking of freedom by billionaire technocrats and other oligarchs. For instance, Joseph Stiglitz's (2024) *The Road to Freedom* challenges the false conflation of economic freedom with political freedom, while, in *Cannibal Capitalism*, Nancy Fraser (2022) argues that many social issues, including climate change and the erosion of democracy, stem from a broader crisis of capitalism caused by the decoupling of the economic sphere from the political. Russell adds to this growing body of work by rightly focusing on media networks and communication. She is not alone. *In Communicating the Future*, W. Lance Bennett (2021) urges climate communicators to step back from the problem/solution model of journalism to focus on communicating a vibrant and more equitable society by "repackaging" the way we talk about economics and politics. Russell's proposed future is more radical. Arguing that those in power view scientific knowledge about climate change as a threat and its advocates as adversaries, which has in effect turned the environmental crisis into an informational crisis, she calls for any action on climate communication to include "cleaning up" the communication environment. Her recommendations include rethinking the social contract with Big Tech and ensuring funding so that journalism can prioritize public health and well-being, thereby repairing the rift over what constitutes truth and which institutions are trustworthy. At present, she writes, journalism's increasing reliance on networked technology platforms to host and deliver content continues to drain power from journalism.

Russell largely limits her examples to the United States, which prevents a more globally nuanced picture and risks limiting her development of a collective imaginary to American ideas. However, the powerful bloc of techno-lords emerging from Silicon Valley to set up shop in Trump's administration somewhat justifies the focus. By paying attention to the literal and figurative wildfires raging in the United States over what constitutes the public good and who gets to define freedom, Russell describes the fight for climate and information justice as part of a longer continuum of collective struggle against the tyrannies of unfettered power.

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