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DATA JOURNALISM, DEEP FEATURES, AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF CLIMATE CRISIS IN A MULTIRACIAL CITY: A CASE STUDY OF *THE LOCAL'S* "TORONTO'S CLIMATE RIGHT NOW" ISSUE

ABSTRACT

The paper reports on the case of Toronto's "Climate Right Now" issue of The Local, a digital news magazine start-up with a health justice focus on urban Toronto. Through a close reading of the issue, which builds on a previous multi-modal study of The Local, it is concluded that The Local's structural commitments to race and equity, which resulted in reporting by and for underserved racialised communities, contributed to a qualitative different kind of climate journalism. This approach centred solutions journalism and visual storytelling featuring community members, and took an inclusive, holistic perspective on newsworthiness of what constituted Toronto's climate. The study contributes to research on climate change journalism by new journalism start-ups as little of such research focuses on climate justice in an urban context in the global north.

KEY WORDS: climate change; journalism start-ups; digital journalism; community journalism; health equity; hyperlocal journalism; climate journalism; climate justice

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Podatkovno novinarstvo, poglobljene reportaže in geografija podnebne krize v večrasnem mestu: študija primera izdaje »Toronto's Climate Right Now« spletne revije *The Local*

IZVLEČEK

Članek obravnava tematsko številko »Toronto's Climate Right Now« revije The Local, digitalnega novičarskega zagonskega medija s poudarkom na zdravstveni pravičnosti v urbanem Torontu. Na podlagi analize te izdaje, ki nadgrajuje predhodno multimodalno študijo medija The Local, ugotavlja, da so strukturne zaveze revije k vprašanjem rase in enakosti, ki so omogočile poročanje s strani zapostavljenih rasiziranih skupnosti in za te skupnosti, prispevale h kvalitativno drugačni obliki podnebnega novinarstva. Ta pristop je v ospredje postavil novinarstvo, osredotočeno na rešitve, in vizualno pripovedovanje zgodb, v katerih so sodelovali člani te skupnosti, obenem pa je zavzel vključujočo, celostno perspektivo glede novičarske vrednosti podnebnega konteksta v Torontu. Študija prispeva k raziskavam podnebnega novinarstva novih novinarskih zagonskih pobud, s čimer deloma zapolnjuje manjko raziskav, ki se osredotočajo na podnebno pravičnost v urbanem okolju globalnega severa.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: podnebne spremembe, novinarska zagonska podjetja, digitalno novinarstvo, skupnostno novinarstvo, zdravstvena pravičnost, hiperlokalno novinarstvo

1 Introduction

In the summer of 2022, *The Local*, a digital journalism start-up based in Toronto, teamed up with *The Narwhal*, a Canadian digital journalism start-up focused on environmental issues, to produce the "Toronto's Climate Right Now" issue. Focused on urban health and the well-being of diverse communities in underserved neighbourhoods, the issue's approach to climate change was qualitatively different from that of the mainstream. Articles ranged from an in-depth exploration of the disproportionate suffering and death of poorer residents living in high rise housing projects; to a first person reflection by a midwife on climate impacts on the health of pregnant women and babies, and on women's calculus about having children; to a long-form text accompanying community naturalists and Indigenous land stewards adapting to the expansion of invasive species through the city's parks and ravines.

This paper contributes to the study of not-for-profit digital journalism start-ups in the Global North, and to the study of climate change journalism, through analyzing *how* the innovative structures, mandates, and ethical commitments of *The Local* produced a different type of climate journalism. It argues that *The Local*'s journalistic practices – such as applying a health equity lens to data journalism work; taking a more holistic and decolonial approach to what issues and stories fit under the rubric of urban "health"; and concentrating on deep features which frame data journalism findings within the narrative arcs of experiences of racialized Torontonians – constitute a distinctive approach that speaks to urbanized, racialized Canadian communities that are often marginalized in mainstream climate journalism. In broaching *The Local*'s coverage, this study builds on a previous multimodal, multiyear study of *The Local*'s journalism (Roburn 2025), which highlighted key ways its coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic differed from mainstream coverage in the greater Toronto region. To augment the thematic, content, and quantitative analyses of this earlier study, this analysis adopts close reading practices commonly used in the environmental humanities. It aims to uncover if there is a consistent "method" to *The Local*'s coverage of both the pandemic and urban climate change in Toronto.

2 Literature review and context

2.1 Challenges to effective climate journalism

Climate change is widely recognized to be a defining issue of our time, and journalism plays a key role in the general public's understanding of it (Schäfer and Painter 2021). A constantly proliferating literature documents a myriad of challenges to effective climate communication, including but not limited to: petroturfing (Kinder 2024) and other forms of climate denialism, often supported by the fossil fuel industry; the need to accurately convey a complex scientific topic to diverse layperson audiences (Callison 2014); the problems posed by the "slow violence" of climate change, which can be less attention grabbing, and therefore less newsworthy, than wars, traffic accidents, and other more "spectacular" events (Nixon 2011); the tendency of climate change coverage to favor elites and elite sources at the expense of the voices of the people most affected (Comfort et al. 2019; Schäfer and Painter 2021); and numerous affective considerations, such as how openness to accepting climate change science can be significantly shaped by political affiliation (Morris 2021), or how coverage that is too alarmist may actually hinder, rather than help, public engagement and citizen action (Appelgren and Jonsson 2021; Denisova 2025).

Climate journalism research often assesses the state of climate journalism in a particular region or across the world (Boykoff et. al 2023; Navuku and Obijiofor 2024; Wang and Downey 2025); focuses on the identity and values of journalists (Engesser 2024; Painter et al. 2024); and questions if specific strategies, such as using data visualization (Morini et al. 2024), or engaging in "future journalism" (Borgen-Eide 2024), are effective in foregrounding climate concerns.

Bruggemann (2017) highlights that journalistic standards and norms have evolved to better respond to the challenges of covering climate change. For example, the standard of "balanced, objective" information has been interpreted with more nuance, using techniques like "weight-of-evidence" reporting (Dunwoody 2015) that contextualizes opinions that are or are not evidence-based. Major newspapers such as *The Guardian* have adapted their style guide vocabularies to better reflect climate realities (Carrington 2019). Significant projects, trainings, and journalism networks exist on local, regional, and national scales, and at journalism schools, to support better climate change reporting. For example, the *Oxford Climate Journalism Network* includes more than 600 reporters in 120 countries; *Covering Climate Change Now* (https://coveringclimatenow.org/), founded by the *Columbia Journalism Review* and *The Nation* magazine, includes over 500 participant organizations in sixty countries reaching billions of people; and *The Earth Journalism Network* focuses specifically on strengthening local journalism about climate change.

2.2 Climate journalism in a time of global media transformation

As Schäefer and Painter (2021) point out, the increasingly urgent need for effective climate change news coverage has coincided with a period of transformation of global news media. Digitization has radically altered the media ecosystem in which journalists operate. For example, legacy media outlets have shifted their resources from print to online journalism, and journalists and news organizations require a presence on social media both for reporting purposes and to reach audiences. Perhaps most importantly, in the last decades, the economic models for "legacy" news media have largely collapsed, triggering a very significant decline particularly in terms of local and community media (Downman and Murray 2018), a dire situation that Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) point out was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Quandt and Wahl viewed the "critical moment" of the pandemic not only as a crisis but as an opportunity for journalism, and particularly digital journalism, to transform and thrive. Partially because digital and data journalism have been in a period of growth, and may be a way to fill in some of the news gaps left by disappearing legacy media (Downman and Murray 2018), researchers have

devoted increasing attention to digital news startups in a variety of locations and contexts (Bruno and Nielsen 2012; Callison and Young 2020; Schaffer 2010, 2013; Simons 2013; Usher 2017; Wu 2023). Germane to this paper, Downman and Murray (2018) argue that (digital) hyperlocal reporting is pivotal to journalism's future.

The Local, whose special issue on climate is the subject of this study, is both a "hyperlocal" community news focused project, and a digital news start-up that makes prominent use of data journalism. Data journalism is a growing area of study, with researchers examining, for example, its interactivity (Appelgren 2019) and audience engagement (Martin et al. 2024), and its role as alternative media (Wu 2024) and in public service journalism (Widholm and Applegren 2022). Wu argues however that overall, research specifically pertaining to data journalism is scarce.

2.3 Data journalism and geographies of difference

This study builds on an earlier case study (Roburn 2025) of *The Local*'s work as a health justice focused digital news startup operating during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Local*'s data journalism was so successful because it filled a gap in pandemic news coverage: mapping health data onto postal-code specific maps starkly illustrated the difference in access to vaccinations, and the difference in health outcomes, between wealthy areas of the city and underserved neighbourhoods. These maps arose out of *The Local*'s commitment to centering "the geography of difference" (The Local, n.d., (a)). The term "geography of difference" is widely used in sociology and geography to describe how relations of power are spatialized. For feminist geographers, spatial relationships not only construct particular places (Massey 2005), but also identities, as experiences of racialization and gendering are enacted through spatial organization (McKittrick 2006).

Geographies of power are especially at play in the case of the slow violence of climate change, with most impacted populations often being spatially and temporally removed from those who are the biggest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. Massey wrote extensively on the "spatialization" or spatial creation and reproduction of modernity into geographies of power based on the centre/periphery economic and governance model of empire adopted by colonial powers. Gutsche and Hess (2019) apply this analysis to articulate how digital journalism institutionalizes place-making, and the impacts this has across "racial, spatial, and institutional spheres of social interactions," (2019: 84) frequently reinforcing existing power relations. Downman and Murray's (2018) work brings this geographic dimension into conversation with the emergence of hyperlocal news start-ups in a time of digital disruption. By centering grassroots voices from

marginalized communities, hyperlocal digital journalism outlets interrupt the tendency of legacy media towards media concentration, and towards a centre/periphery model that minimizes local and regional voices.

Toronto is one of the most diverse cities in the world, with over 200 languages spoken at home by its citizens (Social Planning Toronto, n.d.). *The Local*'s approach relied not only on coming to data through an intersectional lens that asked questions about how race, gender, ability, and other factors impacted public health in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), but extended to specific ethical commitments to hire, train, and support a "pipeline" of racialized journalists from the communities that *The Local* served (Roburn 2025).

While Cohen and Clark (2024) note a general tendence for mainstream digital journalism to reproduce employment precarity and exclusions along racial and gendered lines, Callison and Young (2020) point to new journalism start-ups in Canada – like *The Narwhal* and *The Local* – as spaces of journalistic innovation, including in terms of addressing the lack of diversity in mainstream media newsrooms. As Young and Callison (2021) point out in their ethnographic study of a new journalism start-up, gender, colonialism, and technology matter when it comes to how start-ups articulate and carry out their mission. Motta (2022) documents how new journalism start-ups, particularly those serving marginalized communities, have thrived by developing new networks and supports, often partnering with well-resourced funders not only for financial support, but to develop resources and deliver trainings and tools specifically tailored to helping small community news organizations thrive. Citing Andrea Wenzel's work, Motta argues that start-up journalism practice among news organizations serving marginalized communities inclines toward solutions journalism and engaged journalism. This helps to foster "greater trust between media, community members, and organizations where residents feel more connected and invested," but only to the extent that community journalists "are reflexive about journalistic norms like objectivity, that reinforce hierarchies of race, class, and geography" (Wenzel in Motta 2022: 95). In Motta's estimation, it is characteristic of such start-ups that they catalyse conversations at a national level about journalistic norms, bringing neglected community perspectives into the national and international limelight.

Keeping in mind Motta's claims that community engaged digital start-up journalism brings neglected local perspectives to light, and rupture hierarchies of race, class and geography through a reflexive approach, this study examines the "Toronto's Climate Right Now " Summer 2022 issue of *The Local*, which was jointly produced with another digital journalism start-up, *The Narwhal*. It asks:

(a) Has *The Local* innovated a distinct, and distinctly local, journalistic approach?
(b) What might such an approach offer for climate change reporting in the

Greater Toronto Area (GTA), that is different from legacy media coverage?

(c) How are *The Local*'s structure, processes and ethical commitments "showing up" in specific ways in terms of the issue's reporting?

3 Method

The "Toronto's Climate Right Now" issue was chosen for this close reading for multiple reasons. While much of the current literature suggests that to better cover the "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) of climate change, journalists and other media makers need to focus on the stories of those most impacted (Ejaz and Najam 2023; Reghunath and Zafar 2024), the majority of climate change journalism with a grassroots focus on most affected communities centres rural areas and/or communities in the Global South. As *The Local* instead offers a "hyperlocal" focus on an urbanized setting in the Global North, the analysis can be in conversation with a robust literature on climate communications and journalism, while still contributing something new.

The Local itself, which has won nineteen national level prizes for its coverage, including three top "gold medal" prizes for general excellence at Canada's Digital Publishing Awards, is exemplary of the best of Canadian new journalism startups. Like other Canadian non-profit new journalism start-ups, it does not take advertising but is instead funded by a mix of foundation funding and subscriptions. *The Local* and *The Narwhal* are the first two Canadian Registered Journalism Organizations, non-profits which give tax receipts to donors. They also have specific commitments to financial and donor transparency, to editorial independence, and to codes of ethics that frame journalistic accountability in new ways. Germane to this study, both *The Narwhal* and *The Local* have explicit commitments to racial diversity in the organization's ranks, with *The Local* publishing yearly diversity reports, measuring its Race, Equity, and Representation Commitment, which ensures reporters are members of the communities they serve.

The case study builds on the author's earlier, multi-modal research of the impact of *The Local*'s journalism on health equity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Roburn 2025). An important context arising from this research is that *The Local*'s journalists and editors consistently linked the magazine's innovative reporting, which had a concrete impact on greater health equity in the allocation and accessibility of vaccinations to underserved neighbourhoods, not only to *The Local*'s mandate, but to how that mandate was enacted structurally through the adoption of specific commitments, particularly around Race, Representation, and Equity.[1]

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1. See web.archive.org/web/20250619155212/https://thelocal.to/race-representation-and-equity-commitment/. The Local also has a more general Code of Ethics.

In tying *The Local*'s unique reporting, and thus its appeal, to the fact that *The Local*'s editors, journalists, and fellowship holders[2] were representative of the communities they serve, *Local* interviewees highlighted a crucial, underexamined dimension of "engaged" reporting. A growing body of research examines the impact of negative racial biases in reporting on Black, Asian, Arab, Indigenous, and other racialized groups in North American newsrooms, which are overwhelmingly white (Cheung 2024; Oh and Min 2023) and reflect a "white male social order" (Harp et al. 2020: 239). Yet engagement journalism research such as Robinson and Johnson (2024) focuses on better community outreach and relationship building strategies while failing to acknowledge the root issue that communities are not being reported on from within their own ranks, even as "cultural competence" has emerged a key factor in journalists successfully engaging with BIPOC communities. With rare exceptions, such as Young and Callison's ethnographic research with Indigenous journalists and journalism outlets in Canada demonstrating that "coming from a community actually gives you a form of expertise ... And it should be treated as such" (Young and Callison 2020: 161), there is a paucity of research that examines the journalism produced through more equitable, representative newsrooms in the Global North, including that produced through new journalism start-ups.[3] This lacuna is commonplace: a recent meta-review of the research into legacy and online climate change coverage (Schäfer and Mahl 2025) – research originating overwhelmingly in the Global North – does not mention racial make-up in newsrooms, despite reviewing extant research focused on journalist identity (for example, in terms of "role perception") and organizational context.

In contrast, the "infrastructural" turn in media theory explicitly recognizes that dominant culture prejudices, such as algorithmic or "coded" bias, are embedded within the structures and processes of dominant media systems (Buolamwini 2023; Eubanks 2019; Noble 2018). Such theory centers the experiences and voices that these systems marginalize, not only as subjects/audiences but as producers and designers. The ecomedia research approach applied here draws heavily on intersectional analyses rooted in feminist theory, postcolonial studies, critical disability studies and Indigenous and Black media theory. Such methods are

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2. The fellowship is an annual mentoring program, with fellowship holders publishing work in *The Local*.
3. Substantive research examines the role and impact of multicultural, minority, and ethnic press in Canada, and of Indigenous media (Hayward 2019; Murray 2008), but these are different sectors, distinguished by different federal policy regimes and because they may operate in languages other than English or French.

"culturally competent," in Robinson and Johnson's term, critically interrogating questions of identity and intersectionality within climate change messaging. More specifically, the choice of a close reading strategy follows Song's analysis that close reading is an excellent way of "thinking climate change and race together," surfacing slow violence by "focusing on their attendant affects and observable material consequences," such that "Each [of race and climate change] can act as a frame that helps us to imagine the everyday as other than what it may serenely appear." (Song 2018: 51). The analysis that follows draws inspiration from work such as Lopez's (2022), which acknowledges the roles of slavery and colonialism in shaping a global economy in which climate change impacts are unevenly distributed and mediated, and Monani's (2024) book length study, which complemented a nuts-and-bolts examination of the operation of the world's largest Indigenous (and Indigenous led) film and media festival with analyses of specific film texts, in order to highlight how Indigenous ecocinema offers a decolonial perspective distinct from other ecomedia.

Echoing Monani's methods, this case study complements an earlier multimodal study of *The Local*'s workings over a six-month period, by focusing on a close reading of a particular text, the "Toronto's Climate Right Now" issue. It is "situated," in context of the author's earlier research into *The Local*, but also through the author's years of Indigenous and ecomedia focused scholarship and field work, and of residence in Toronto. Mindful of urban media theorist Mattern's caution that countering the deficits of informatic/computational models of urbanism requires attending to "urban epistemological ecologies," this situatedness informs the interpretation of the issue's climate change storytelling within the context of a vibrant multiracial city in which "nontextual, unrecordable forms of cultural memory ... are especially relevant for marginalized populations" (Mattern 2021: 64) and environmental knowledge often finds expression in nonsemantic, ambient, and immanent forms. Table 1 lays out the articles in the issue in sequential order as they appear on thelocal.to website, the article type, and the author's affiliation. The close reading that follows considered the individual article texts and accompanying image and video, the interrelationships of the articles and their placement within the issue, and the issue in the context of the broader cycle of *The Local*'s quarterly issue output.

Table 1: Articles in the "Toronto's Climate Right Now" issue.

Article title	Type author	Affiliation
We're in a Climate Emergency—It's Time We Started Acting Like It	Lead editorial	Local editor
As Toronto Temperatures Rise, Inequalities Widen	Long feature and photo story	Local editor and freelancer
The Weight of Childbirth During a Climate Crisis	Perspective/ personal narrative	Community member/ nonjournalist
A Brine Against Nature	Short science/policy focused feature with data graphics	Narwhal editor
The Line Between 'Invasive' and 'Native' Blurs	Long feature and photo story	Freelancer for The Local
How a Downtown Landfill Became an Accidental Bird Sanctuary	Long feature and photo story	Narwhal editor and photographer
The Drive to Reduce Car Pollution Hits Gridlock	Long science/policy focused feature with data graphics	Narwhal editor
The Great (Surprisingly Expensive) Outdoors	Long feature and photo story	Strong affiliation with both magazines
Carving Out a Brand New Island	Long feature and photo story	Freelancer for The Local

4 Analysis

4.1 Tipoffs in the tagline

Four key thematics emerged from the analysis of the "Toronto's Climate Right Now" issue: public health framing, visual storytelling, holistic orientation, and an emphasis on solutions journalism. These are perhaps best introduced through the issue's front image and editorial (Figure 1).
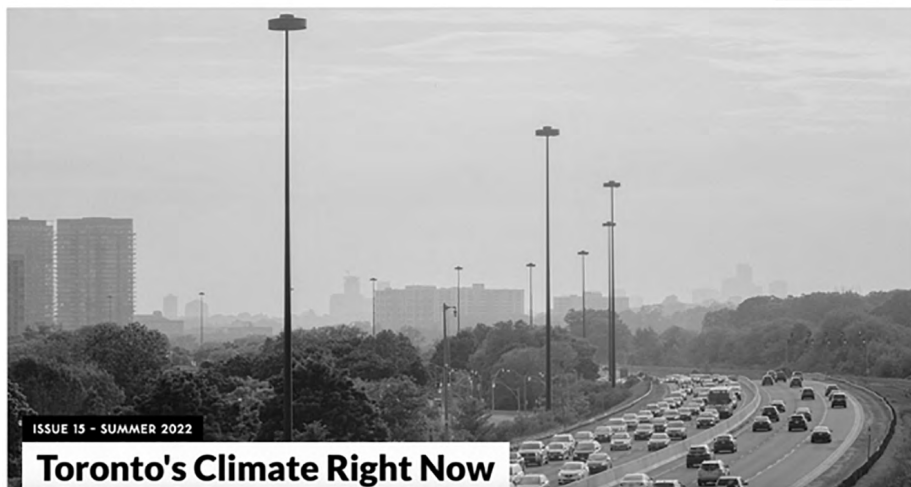
Figure 1.

"Toronto's Climate Right Now" opens with a wide-angle view of a curve in a multi-lane freeway, with one direction of the traffic in rush hour gridlock. Heavy crowns of mature deciduous trees cloak the highway's margins. Massive roadway lights, towering several stories above the treeline, break the sightlines at regular intervals along the roadway's curve. In the middle and far distance, the outlines of residential towers are grouped along the highway, their details obscured in brownish smog. The tagline reads "From heat inequality to invasive species, from an urban bird sanctuary to a brand new Toronto island – stories about vulnerability and adaptation in Canada's biggest city, a collaboration between *The Local* and *The Narwhal*" (The Local (b) Summer 2022).

This text and visual presentation articulate facets of an approach to urban climate change that is consistent both across the issue, and within the arc of *The Local*'s broader storying of the city. The reporting is unabashedly "hyperlocal," embedded in the workplaces, transit routes, and homes of Toronto's inner city and less favoured suburbs. While the issue approaches climate change through a health justice frame, what is foregrounded is the vibrancy of the city itself. Although the tagline focus on "vulnerability and adaptation" echoes the language of climate science and policy, and although sound science and a focus on policy choices ground individual articles, the stories of climate emergency encompass a more expansive arc than is usual with legacy media climate reporting in Canada. This is both in terms of subject matter that is included, and the holistic approach. The cover image illustrates one of the key themes across the feature articles: that

a city is a jumble of green (natural) and grey (human-built) infrastructure. Both are needed for urban communities and ecologies to thrive, yet benefits and harms are unequally structured into the built environment.

Visual storytelling, such as the cover image, is a key placemaking strategy. It embeds the reader not just in locations, but in communities, and the juxtapositions within and between images convey contradictions and complexities. The photo stories accompanying feature articles bring vibrancy and break up discrete sections of text, creating spaces for reflection and co-existence of multiple facets of "wicked" climate problems, and contributing to *The Local*'s efforts "to fill a role that traditional media neglects – turning complex policy issues into compelling narratives, [and] addressing problems that are systemic and ongoing, even if they don't have a news hook" (The Local (c) n.d.). The photos also echo the texts in positing community members as the most prominent and central subjects and experts.

A final facet of the tagline presentation is its optimism and openness to possibility – a sanctuary, a new island – that fit with a solutions journalism approach.

A brief editorial, which opens with Toronto's city council's declaration of a climate emergency, quickly zooms from the science and policy behind the declaration to climate change's "hyper-local" consequences, arguing that "harms from extreme weather events will always disproportionately affect those already on the margins of our city – the elderly and the urban poor, those who live or work in buildings without proper ventilation or cooling." (The Local June 21, 2022). Maintaining an informal tone, the editorial promptly distills the issue down through an analysis focused on structural inequalities: "Climate change is the result of meteorological conditions, sure, but our experience of it is the result of specific policies and politics—the way our cities are organized, the inequities already baked in." After highlighting the collaborative nature of the issue, the editorial ends by framing the issue as both critical and hopeful: critical, at a critical time, of the urgent problems of climate breakdown, but hopeful that there is time to build resilience and avoid the worst harms.

4.2 Public health is personal

While including touchpoints common to mainstream science reporting, such as opening the editorial with globally accepted science of a UN IPCC report, the issue is distinguished through its immersive focus on public health. This emphasis begins with the first long form article "As Toronto Temperatures Rise, Inequalities Widen," which reiterates the editorial emphasis on structural inequalities immediately in its tagline that "Climate change causes heat waves, but the city's

politics, policies, and design determine who suffers most." It continues through to the final article on the urban design challenges of creating a climate positive downtown neighbourhood on an island newly created at the mouth of the Don River to rewild and restore wetlands in order to mitigate flooding and make the urban waterfront more climate resilient. As Weathers et al. (2018) describe, health communication research suggests that the framing of climate change as a health issue engages and empowers more readers: it counters polarization along political lines, as health is a commonly held value, and it grounds the abstract and complex problem of climate change in concrete, urgent everyday life concerns that are accepted and understood. This is key: without diminishing the focus on the most vulnerable, (in line with *The Local*'s social/health justice values), a health focus brings the risks "close": one's own children, or elders, may be affected. People are most likely to change their behaviour or take action when their personal sense of risk is heightened (Weathers et al. 2017).

"As Toronto's Temperatures Rise," resonates with other *Local* articles that foreground climate risks to human health by immediately grounding the narrative in an embedded, embodied scene of impacted, "vulnerable" community members taking action in their neighbourhoods. The image at the top of the article depicts Shaheen Kausar, turning on an aging, duct taped window air conditioning unit, harsh sunlight pouring down on both her home and the public housing tower which fills up much of the window view within the image. Kausar is a member of Community Resilience to Extreme Weather (CREW), an association of residents in public housing towers organizing in the face of extreme heat stress in their homes. The article follows CREW during a heat wave, as members go door-to-door checking on neighbours and assisting tenants where possible to get to cooler places such as a local library, community centre or cooling centre.

The challenges of this public health context become clear because of the granular, "close" view of residents within such a long feature: immigrant and refugee residents face language barriers and a lack of familiarity with how to access cooler places; a pensioner cannot afford to turn on their air conditioning unit; seniors and other residents with mobility challenges cannot easily reach cooler locations. With apartments remaining overheated well into the night, working age tenants, whom the article explains are "more likely to work in hot conditions, like construction or manufacturing, or physically intensive roles that require them to be on their feet all day," may endure sustained exposure to excessive heat for days at a time. The "street level" photography also manages to keep community members "close" – seven of nine photographs depict CREW and other residents in the St. James complex – while making the "picture" of structural inequalities visually apparent. An early section explaining the science

of urban heat islands is punctured by a photo, taken from a high-rise tower, of eight brutalist, concrete high-rise towers filling the frame. The only splashes of colour are a mural on one building, the orange hues of crepuscular sunlight, and a tiny patch of pale blue sky in the upper right corner of the frame. A later aerial shot looks down on the only tree cover in the photostory: a small parkette surrounded by St. James Town highrises.

The public health focus extends not just through place, but in time: the text delves deep into past urban heat wave events in Toronto, Chicago (a city with a similar, Great Lakes influenced climate), and Vancouver, breaking down city emergency policy responses, within the context of hundreds of deaths which skewed heavily towards vulnerable low income residents, with children, seniors, people with disabilities, and Black residents overrepresented.

Importantly, this focus is couched within stories of citizen and community action and advocacy to address the policy choices which have produced these unequally distributed health consequences. Beyond the actions of CREW, the article highlights a son fighting for air conditioning not only for his mother but across all long-term care homes, and a local general practitioner in St. James Town using the limited tools she has to acquire air conditioning for at risk patients through the Ontario Disability Support Program. In this way, the public health framing is enmeshed in a narrative of community empowerment. These themes not only mutually reinforce one another: they mutually reinforce the impulses that climate communications research underscores as prompting action and behaviour change. As Motta (2022) noted, this "solutions journalism" focus is crucial for engaging and empowering those who distrust mainstream journalism due to the perception that it scapegoats their communities as criminals and/or victims.

4.3 Holism and nuance

"Toronto's Climate Right Now" stands out because for a magazine aimed at a general, but local, readership, it brings a surprising depth and breadth to its coverage. Locally-focused storytelling arcs are used to disrupt one more barrier to journalism that supports citizen climate action, that climate is a problem too complex to grasp.

Storytelling – and specifically the juxtaposition of multiple, situated stories and points of view –happens both within individual narratives and in the layering of different perspectives on the same problem. The primacy of racialized, local community voices is key to this complexity. The second story in the issue, "The Weight of Childbirth During a Climate Crisis," is a simple first-person essay from a young former nurse turned midwifery student. It juxtaposes her experiences ministering to elderly patients with heat stroke and delirium in an overstressed

hospital system during a summer heat wave, with stories from her own life and her experiences as a midwife, in order to contemplate what it means to bring new life into the world in a time of climate crisis. The reflections reiterate equity concerns, framed in terms of maternal and infant health, but expressed with an almost startling vulnerability of a Gen Z voice narrating the "terrifying and discouraging" threat of climate breakdown that has stalked her generation since childhood (Chatterjee July 5, 2022). Her explanation of her choice to retrain as a midwife exhibits the delicate balance between two potentialities/motivations for climate action: the movement towards hope and life (each birth a rebirth of love, and possibility) and the awareness of stark present and future realities as climate crisis continues unchecked.

Unlike almost every other story, the narrative has only one photo, a domestic image of the author on a couch by a window. Instead of photos, poignant pull quotes both flesh out and break up the text, further amplifying the emotional impact of the author's story. Climate communication literature underlines that such uses of voice and personal experience are disarming, creating emotional connection – in conflict resolution terms, storytelling draws us in to a place of shared concern, whereas more abstract climate debates can polarize into positions, which are more rigid (Denisova 2025).

The narrative brings complexity to the climate change story in another way: along with such pressures as unaffordable housing and financial precarity, the climate crisis is cast as one more dimension of an increasingly unliveable world that gives pause to people contemplating having children in a future that is increasingly unpredictable and unsafe. This folding together of economic and environmental "scarcity" as part of a contiguous generational experience speaks back to mainstream media narratives which frequently frame economic and environmental needs as polarities between which there is an "either/or" trade-off.

This holistic approach to climate reaches its most sophisticated in one of the issues longest features, "The Line Between 'Invasive' and 'Native' Blurs." The feature offers a deep dive into the management of invasive species within Toronto parks and ravines. Climate change has favoured the flourishing of many non-native plants, which in some cases take over the ecological niches of native species and extirpate them. However, rather than presenting this process in a purely unfavourable light, the article engages in a nuanced examination of the issue, again through the stories of grassroots community groups.

The feature begins with the heartbreak of the members of a community group "Friends of Small Creek," witnessing workers with chainsaws and woodchippers clear a hundred-year old forest in the Small Creek ravine wetland. Despite

the wetland being an endangered urban ecosystem, providing a rare "wild" refuge for people and plants, the clearcutting to make way for the expansion of a commuter rail line had been justified by the regional transit authority on the grounds that 205 of 268 trees were classified as invasive species.

A nuanced discussion of the category of "invasive species" follows, providing a throughline as the piece takes the reader through multiple examples of local places in ecological transition. This discussion is adept in bringing together urban human and plant communities through shared colonial histories of migration, intentional and not, spurred by global trade and politics. It puts the rhetoric around invasive species – a favouring of genetic "purity," and the policing of what is not from here – in conversation with "nativist" biases that frames human migration as invasive and unwanted. With ecological niches moving due to accelerated climate change, scientific experts and local residents alike question rigid categories of who (plant or person) belongs in a place. Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle (ILSC) member Donna Powless, Cayuga from Six Nations, proposes that "every plant has a purpose." (Powless in Won Ken, June 25, 2022). Pointing out that Powless uses invasive as well as native plants in her traditional practices, the narration follows Powless and Henry Pitawanakwat performing ceremony during a controlled burn of High Park's black oak savannah ecosystem, planted by Indigenous people thousands of years ago. Powless articulates a vision of Indigenous land stewardship "built on the need for harm reduction and climate action" (Powless in Won Ken June 25, 2022). This includes small controlled burns, and hand pulling invasive plants of concern rather than using pesticides, but also caring for ancient burial mounds in High Park. It reflects a world view in which Indigenous people have a close relationship with the land, strive to keep balance rather than control, and honour the presence of ancestors.

A final layer of analysis incorporates a policy perspective via the words of Toronto's Director of Urban Forestry, Parks Forestry and Recreation. The balance that must be achieved, in the case of the Small Creek Ravine, is not just between native and non-native species, but between "green" and "grey" infrastructure. A climate friendly city has both green spaces to provide shade, purify air and water, and shelter biodiversity, and public transit and other infrastructures that allow residents to be low-carbon in how they go about their business.

Layering together past and present, science and Indigenous knowledge, policy and grassroots community experiences, the article succeeds in offering a complex, dynamic, and singular picture of how one might approach one aspect of climate change's influence on urban ecosystems.

Another way *The Local* holds nuance and keeps systemic, ongoing public health issues in holistic focus is through repeatedly returning to such issues. In

summer 2024, *The Local* published another collaboration with *The Narwhal* on "the wave of a green transition, and ... the ways climate commitments and business imperatives collide in Canada's biggest city" (The Local (e) 2024). The consistency of return is not just in subject matter, but in structure: numerous themed issues offer snapshots of Toronto right now, whether it is Toronto at 3 AM (and the lives of shift workers), or the "seven days in Toronto" issue characterizing everyday life during the pandemic.

4.4 Visual storytelling

Earlier research on *The Local* (Chen and Roburn 2025; Roburn 2025) highlighted the importance of data journalism and digital storytelling. The *Climate Right Now* issue is also very image-rich: almost all the features have a credited, assigned photographer, with between a half-dozen to over forty images accompanying each article text. This saturation of imagery is one kind of digital start-up innovation: print magazines simply cannot afford dozens of colour images required to give imagery a more central role in their storytelling.

Photography enhances the "placemaking" of the issue by situating the reader vividly in particular locations; by foregrounding local community members as an actual embodied presence within the narrative; and by visually representing urban nature as a complex jumble of the built world, humanity, and biota overlapping in both planned and surprising ways. While the feature writing "grounds" subject matter by placing interlocuters in various scenes, it is the multiple photographs which provide a composite view and capture telling details, whether following along with an inner city elementary school class on an outdoor education field trip, or offering a sequence of snaps of birds being captured, banded, and released at a bird banding station in the "rewilded" Leslie Street Spit. These kinds of dynamic sequences epitomize *The Local*'s effort to depict Toronto's climate "right now."

The imagery that accompanies feature articles is notable in centering local residents, rather than scientists or policy makers. There are multiple photographs of Donna Powless and other Indigenous Torontonians undertaking ILSC activities in High Park, of CREW members and tenants in action in the St. Jamestown towers, and of staff and volunteers at the Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station. Such visual representations foreground the actual embodied presence of community members, especially racialized people, disabled residents, senior citizens and other vulnerable/marginalized Torontonians. The difference is significant: such bodies are scarce in legacy media reporting, appearing mainly in victim centred narratives or stories of lack. In *The Local*'s reporting, we see community members in action, as agents responding to and shaping their

circumstances, even within strictures imposed by poverty and other structural barriers. Community members belong in, and to, these places: they make Toronto the city that it is.

Finally, photography is effective in depicting a distinctly urban nature, through visually conveying the interrelatedness of humanity, biota, and the built world. This is especially evident in the final feature "Carving Out a Brand New Island," which explores the re-engineering of the mouth of the Don River toward a more natural flow, complete with wetlands for flood control, and the creation of a forty hectare man-made island to house 10 000 people in a new, "climate-positive" neighbourhood. The photography complements both a diagram of the Don River's planned redirection and an artist's rendition of the planned neighbourhood, replete with parkland and trees, nestled between channels of the Don River, with a verdant Toronto Island in the background, and downtown Toronto gleaming off to one side. The photography is chiefly wide angle aerial shots of the construction zone: large machines at work moving dirt and gravel on the island and a long spit/breakwater that will be a future park; mud, greenery, and gleaming white sections of yet to be laid flood protection pipe next to a partially built flood control structure; the wide span of new bridges, one with water underneath, and the other crossing an as yet dry channel. Two of the photos are GIFs, the eye drawn to vehicles and machinery in motion. The display makes clear the industrial labour and manpower that underlies this "green" community project.

Maps, charts, and other data visualizations are prominent in only two features addressing road salt and air pollution, written by journalists whose primary affiliation is with *The Narwhal*. The visualizations support story arcs that speak to a city-wide picture rather than one grounded in particular localities, and feature "expert" voices of scientific researchers, city officials, and heads of non-profit advocacy groups. This paucity of data journalism is out of step with *The Local*'s pandemic coverage (Roburn 2025) and requires further inquiry to explain.

4.5 Solutions journalism

The final piece in the issue, "Carving Out a Brand New Island," takes the reader on-site to where bold plans for a "dream of a (mostly) car-free neighbourhood, where apartments are heated by geothermal energy and residents are only steps from boat launches and bike paths, surrounded by reinvigorated wetlands and greenery," (Watson June 21, 2022) are in the process of being actualized. The scope and scale of the project are extremely ambitious, a "model for the world" of a restored and rewilded river mouth, complete with a new island which includes a community meeting the highest environmental and liveability standards.

This piece, as well as Fatima Syed's feature on outdoor education, "The Great (Surprisingly Expensive) Outdoors," are especially forward-thinking, concerned not just with short-term measures for a pressing current problem, but with what actions, programs, and policies will shape what Toronto is like in ten, twenty-, or thirty-years' time. This stretches the usual bounds of community solutions journalism into the realm of futurism. Jason Lewis explains that for Indigenous people, "future imaginaries" are vital:

> Our absence from the future imaginaries of the settler culture should worry us. Absence implies non-existence, or, at the very least, non-importance. A people that are absent in the future need not be consulted in the present about how that future comes about. A culture that is assumed not to be important one hundred years from now can be discounted now (Lewis 2014: 58).

Within media studies, it is widely acknowledged that flourishing of Indigenous and Afro-American futurisms in music, film, speculative fiction, and other expressions of popular culture is a crucial fulcrum that decolonial social movements leverage to energize and educate in support of broader social change. But what to make of future imaginaries in hyperlocal journalism? For the communities it serves, *The Local* concretizes "speculative" imaginaries as real, attainable possibilities. Its journalism locates beginnings that exist in the present, offering practical, evidence-based pathways for these to amplify and thrive in the future.

After identifying in the article tagline that "introducing kids to nature is how you build the next generation of environmentalists," Fatima Syed (July 9, 2022) offers a comprehensive analysis of local innovations and challenges to creating culturally relevant, accessible, affordable outdoor education programming for kids from low income and immigrant communities. Syed highlights the work of a Black vice-president of the Ontario Society for Environmental Education, of the Halton Black Voices collective which "help(s) those living in community housing beautify their neighbourhoods, while also taking Black families out camping and hiking," and of a hands-on, land-based program supporting local immigrant youth to become climate leaders. When the article moves on to barriers and possible policy options to reduce them, the implication is clear: Black, immigrant, queer, and other marginalized youth deserve and need to be the environmental leaders of tomorrow, and this is more than possible.

5 Discussion

A close reading of the text, images, sequencing, and other aspects of the "Toronto's Climate Right Now" issue suggests that *The Local* has a mission-driven focus on public health; uses rich visual storytelling to foreground the community it serves, to offer multiple perspectives on multifaceted subjects and issues, and to highlight the science that makes health inequalities apparent; focuses on long-form features in which storytelling provides the narrative arc on which to hang complex discussions of policy and science; and is ambitious in its solutions journalism.

The reporting not only makes a science-based case showing inequitable distributions of public health goods (including a healthy environment), but showcases pragmatic policy pathways to short- and long-term change. Discussions of science and policy are attached to the lived experience of local people (and sometimes plants) in ways that encourage communities to dream big, to be as involved in setting future directions for Toronto as wealthier, better enfranchised neighbourhoods. *The Local*'s data, science, and policy-engaged journalism epistemically centers Indigenous and racialized communities, recognizing local people as knowledge holders and decision makers whose roles are essential to a thriving Toronto, now and in the future. While some of this centering is overt, for example in focusing on outdoor education for racialized youth as leaders of tomorrow, some strategies are less so. For instance, the geographically situated, cyclical return to climate change across various temporal registers (within the issue, across issues) resonates with Indigenous oral storytelling forms (Archibald 2008). Arguing that "Western media could prevent Western man from comprehending Black geographies and alternative media outside his own purview," Towns (2022: 59), points to orality, along with sticks, rocks, constellations, trinkets, and bodies, as forming part of the "makeshift mediations" of escaping slaves that "extended Black people into alternative, Black futurities" (2022: 63). In stressing that Black geographies and Black media are deeply intertwined "as media and communication have always been connected to questions of transportation and geographic space" (2022: 59), Towns underlines that illegibility to dominant culture was vital to the media of Black emancipation. However, this same illegibility can cause the discounting of "alternate genres of humanity expressed in the(se) alternate forms of mediation," (Towns 2022: 77). Put more simply, to shift geographies of difference (and inequality) requires a reconfiguration of media.

In this context, something more is at work at *The Local* than simply solutions journalism. It is likely that the cohort of young, racialized journalists from

underrepresented communities, mentored through multiple methods[4], created an interpretive community from which a more ambitious and culturally competent type of community journalism emerged. "Toronto's Climate Right Now's" final article describing the forming of an entirely new island, complete with an equitable and eco-friendly community, illustrates the scope of such ambition. The scale of imaginary is world-building, with graders, loaders and bulldozers breaking down and repurposes the existing order. It resonates with the world-building scales of Afrofuturist visions—visions woven into music, movies, literature as well as more ephemeral contemporary expressions of Black popular culture—but with the added underlying message that sweeping, infrastructural change to urban community lifeworlds can and is being made real.

6 Conclusion

Journalism research has been poorly attuned to the Black, Indigenous, and racialized humanities, futurities, and lifeworlds that form part of the milieu[5] not only of *The Local*'s journalists, but of the communities they serve. The vibrancy of these communities, and their present and potential expertise in community environmental stewardship and planning, are not adequately foregrounded in today's climate journalism. This is a problem on multiple registers. As Young and Callison (2020) have argued, poor representation of racialized and Indigenous communities contributes to a crisis of audience in the multicultural cities of the Global North, as fewer and fewer people see themselves in the subject matter and slant of mainstream news. In the case of the more focused concern of climate communications, engagement rises when communities feel empowered and see problems as actionable: a greater focus on the climate adaptation successes of racialized and Indigenous communities – both emergent/innovative and those rooted in thousands of years of cultural and environmental stewardship – would be of benefit not only to these communities, but for climate journalism as a whole.

What does this mean for future research agendas, and for evolutions of climate journalism? In Canada, the surge in research into new journalism startups is one hopeful direction, especially in so far as it attends to the evolving structures and ethical commitments of such start-ups, and how they structure organizational and journalism cultures. The broadening scope of community engaged journalism

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4. Roburn (2025) describes in much greater detail *The Local*'s programs and strategies to create a professional "pipeline" for racialized journalists to reach the highest levels throughout Canadian journalism.
5. Jennifer Gabrys's *Program Earth* (2016) offers an extended discussion of milieu in the context of environmental mediation.

research is another: early results from Lochan-Aristide, Blanchette, and Chen's research into the Green Line (Alshami 2025) document the emergence of a novel framework for "hyperlocal" community engagement in which journalistic outputs, consumed asynchronously, are but one step in a repeating cycle of information sharing and community building events centred on accessing and evolving solutions for stronger communities. Given that overall, digital journalism is reproducing racial and gendered inequalities in who has power and who is precarious in the newsroom (Cohen and Clarke 2024), it seems incumbent on journalism researchers who are serious about climate communication to ask more persistent and profound questions about representation within journalistic ranks. This will almost certainly open possibilities for more engaging and effective climate journalism.

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