

Nils Pharo, Professor at the Department of Archivistics, Library and Information Science, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway, nils.pharo@oslomet.no

Book review:

Research communication in the climate crisis: Open letters and the mobilization of information

Graminius, Carin (2023). Research communication in the climate crisis: Open letters and the mobilization of information [Doctoral Thesis (compilation)]. Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University.

Carin Graminius defended her PhD-thesis *Research communication in the climate crisis: open letters and the mobilization of information* at Lund University on 24th of November 2023. In the thesis Graminius (2023), via five articles and an introductory summary chapter (kappa), investigates scholars'¹ engagement in the climate crisis through the use of open letters.

Open letters constitute a genre that, as far as I know, has not been the subject of previous research – at least not from a library and information science (LIS)/scholarly communication perspective. Graminius thus enters an unexplored territory and she clears the land.

Three research questions guide the thesis (p. 21):

RQ1): What does climate scholars' engagement in open letters contribute to understandings of research communication?

¹ Like Graminius I will switch between using the terms scholars and researchers in this text.

RQ2): In which ways do researchers intend to make information matter (mobilize information) through their open letter communication practices?

RQ3): How, and in which ways, does open letter communication come to shape, reshape and affirm researchers' professional identities?

Further, the thesis addresses five specific problems (p. 22), each of which are allocated an individual article:

- How do open letters, seen as a communication form and practice, bridge and conflate notions of scholarly and science communication?
- How the concept of information shape researchers' communication does practices in open letters, and in turn, how is information shaped by these same practices?
- What kind of social collectives are presented and enacted in the open letters through affective practices?
- What kind of professional identities does engagement in the open letters on climate change shape, reshape, and affirm?
- In which ways do researchers enact "media logic" in their open letter engagements, and why?

In the introduction Graminius does a good job in coupling each article with their corresponding research questions.

I teach, perform research in, and supervise students theses within 'scholarly communication', thus I was first a little confused when I saw the term 'research communication' used in the title. Fortunately, it is defined early on in the thesis and put in contrast with the related concepts 'scholarly communication' and 'science communication'. Graminius uses research communication as "an umbrella term to signal a theoretical integration of scholarly and science communication" (p. 25) and further states that scholarly communication denotes peer-to peer communication whereas science communication is directed towards non-experts. Research communication, on the other hand, can have both peers and non-experts as the intended audiences, and in her work, Graminius shows how open letters may be targeted towards both groups.

Another core concept is 'open letters', which traditionally were published in newspapers with the intent of advocating some kind of (political) change. The most famous example being Emile Zola's *J'accuse* letter, which was addressed to the President of France and aimed at mobilizing support for the release of Alfred Dreyfus, a French artillery officer of Jewish ancestry, who had been falsely accused for treason and sentenced to lifelong deportation. The letter was published on the front page of the newspaper *L'Aurore*. Eventually, and without doubt partly as a result of Zola's letter, Dreyfus was exonerated and returned to his work in the army.

Today's open letters are typically written and signed by groups of academics or other groups that hold some form of authority. The addressee is often someone with the power to make a change. The climate crisis, along with the Covid-19 pandemic are among the topics being subject for many such letters in recent times.

Graminius takes an interdisciplinary approach in her examination of open letters. She situates her study in environmental communication, science communication and scholarly communication, the latter being part of information studies (or, in this reviewer's perspective: library and information

science). Central to her study is the use of a practice theory perspective. Practices are understood as the everyday work activities of those who are observed, Graminius uses Latour and Woolgar's (1986) study of the scientists 'laboratory life' and how this affects their knowledge construction as a famous example. She goes on to explain that practice studies can mean different things in studies of information, but "the general consensus is that different fields, objects, and actors come together and become observable in a practice" (p. 47). Central analytical units in Graminius' thesis are academic institutions, scholars, climate change communication, the environment, and media. In the five articles she addresses different practices through the analysis of interviews and texts.

Originally, open letters were not decided upon as the focus of the study. Graminius explains that she was interested in investigating collaborative research communication on issues related to climate change and "how different actors and contexts shape climate change information and communicative imperatives" (p. 62). The engagement through open letters constitute one out of many activities. By choosing open letters, I believe she made an interesting choice. As already mentioned, there is a lack of research on this genre of texts.

In all, 17 letters were selected for analysis, following a screening process. The letters were selected on the basis that they should be written by European academics and address "anthropogenic climate change" (p. 65). The letters could have been published in print news media, community and organisational homepages or social media sites. In addition, Graminius contacted the initiators and authors of letters in order to interview them. Thirteen of the authors responded positively, but for four of the letters none of the authors replied. In other words, she ended up conducting interviews with 13 authors of nine different letters. All 13 were interviewed in a first round of interviews whereas in a second round six interviews were performed.

The five articles address the production of open letters (Article I), temporal aspects (Article II), emotional/affective characteristics (Article III), and researchers' professional identities (Article IV and V).

The engagement in open letters initiation and writing typically starts with the wish to make a change, wake those in charge, and rise the public to action. This undeniably is also the case for the initiators of open letters concerning the climate crisis. It also exemplifies an exception from the 'normal life' of research who, according to one of Graminius' interlocutors (which is her own preferred term) who are quoted in Article I "Conflating scholarly and science communication practices: the production of open letters on climate change" and states that "it is not really good for our careers to prioritise public communication. We should instead write peer reviewed articles that no one reads" (p. 166). On the other hand, as Graminius shows, the engagement in open letters writing may also have a positive professional effect as the activity forms an arena where academic networks are developed, and the letters connected "researchers who were previously unknown to each other to collaborate in other forms, such as scholarly papers for high impact journals or external projects" (p. 167). It is also interesting to learn how the open letters writing process imitates scholarly writing with respect to the extensive use of (external) peer review. In the thesis, we learn that often several rounds of editing take place before the letters were submitted to the appropriate venue. In contrast to traditional scholarly writing, after review rounds the reviewers themselves were offered to be included as co-authors (p. 169-170).

Article II "Fast-food information, information quality and information gap: a temporal exploration of the notion of information in science communication on climate change" address, amongst other things, venues for open letters. In this article Graminius explores what temporal aspect of 'concepts of information' can reveal about how scholars view their open letter activities. The accelerating

climate change influencing life of earth represents a fundamental temporal backbone, but this is not the main issue in the analysis. One interesting concept is what Graminius coins 'fast-food information'. The 'fast' having little to do with the content but is associated with the speed of digestion and the information's lack of fulfilment. The quality of the content is not what causes information's inability to "stick", rather it is the channels where information is communicated that makes information fast-food. Social media foremost being such a fast-food information channel, as in the following quote from one of the interlocutors:

I do not want to go on Twitter and I do not want to use it. Because I think Twitter really contributes to this superfast information environment, fast-food information environment. I see people who are constantly tweeting, but then they do not pay attention to what is actually happening, they do not listen to the talk when they are there because they are only tweeting about it. And people just click on it and say "like", "yes", or "retweet", and that is it. What is the quality of this information? What is the quality? Then you can say like, "oh, I have been retweeted 20 times", but it really does not say anything about what people actually do with the information. (p. 188)

An interpretation I really find interesting follows; "the digital functions and the speed they encourage direct readers' attention away from the actual content of information to numerical ratings", i.e. easily digestion of information. Along with very interesting analysis of the concepts of 'information quality', where 'quality' is associated with slow pace and publishing in news media, and 'information gap', which is signified by intersection between lack of content and information; the latter resonating with classical views of information both in information science and communication science as something that is communicated or transferred, the article makes a very interesting read, which I highly recommend to be read on its own.

In article III "Research Communication on Climate Change through Open Letters: Uniting Cognition, Affect and Action by Affective Alignments", the scholars' use of affective means are explored. The article starts with Greta Thunberg' "I want you to panic"-quote and does not hide the intention and engagement in the climate issue of neither the open letter authors nor the author of the thesis. I do not find this "lack of neutrality" problematic; Graminius investigates in a thorough manner affect and emotions used as "alignments as representation and practice" (p. 204). Among the affective techniques she identifies are discourses to create collectives of different actors, e.g., encouraging children and youths and scholars and business leaders stand together. Also, she finds that in the letters there is no conflict between affect and cognition, quite the opposite, Graminius emphasises how the letters combines scientific arguments with affect; that it is rational to be anxious "if one understands the facts" (p. 214).

In the final two articles (no IV "Open letters and climate communication: the professional roles and identities of researchers in times of crisis" and V "Publishing strategies and professional demarcations: enacting media logic in academic climate communication through open letters") the effect of open letters writing on researchers' identities is central. In article IV she uses two analytical tools to investigate how open letter writing shape the scholars identities; practice-inspired analysis and storytelling. The analysis results in an apparently Janus-faced group of scholars; on the one hand engagement in open letters "could pave the way towards a new professional role" (p. 238) whereas on the other hand the open letter writing could be viewed as a practice within the current normal science-activities which were encouraged by the scholars' institutions. In the final article, the scholars' enactment of media logic is central. 'Media logic' I understand as their perception of how news media work. Interestingly, she returns to the importance of news media and why this media form is so important to the researchers. Graminius used thematic analysis to identify three 'components' of media logic: celebrity, confrontation/style, and timeliness. The study participants appeared to be

sceptic to the logic and seeing it as something not belonging in academia; nevertheless they actively made use of it as a “publication strategy” (p. 257), e.g. by actively seeking to include prominent researchers, i.e. celebrities, among the signatories. In addition to using them for analysing the researchers strategies, Graminius elegantly points out how these media logic components are also present in traditional scholarly writing, e.g. how timeliness is often extremely important in order to gain credit for findings as well as how “known” researchers easier get additional credit than newcomers in a field, described by Merton as the so-called Matthew effect (Merton, 1973). Again, news media is put in contrast with social media, and it would have been interesting to know whether there is any effect of the interlocutors’ age in the material, e.g. when they (the interlocutors) stress that “social media can be used for self-promotion and communication with fellow peers in terms of their research. However, in matters of outreach, the news media was still perceived as unparalleled in terms of impact and power” (p. 254).

To sum up, Graminius documents a well-designed and interesting project with this thesis. As with any thesis there are missing parts or parts that could have been detailed better. In this case I could have wished for a discussion of how her choice of the climate crisis as the context of the study. What would we have learned from analysing a different case, such as the pandemic? Research communication as a topic of study has many interesting possibilities; with this study Carin Graminius gives us valuable insight into how important actors address the climate crisis.

The reviewer served at the committee at the viva of this dissertation.

Graminius, C. (2023). *Research communication in the climate crisis: Open letters and the mobilization of information* [Doctoral Thesis (compilation)]. Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University.

Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1986). *Laboratory life: The construction of scientific facts* ([New ed.]). Princeton University Press.

Merton, R. K. (1973). *The sociology of science: Theoretical and empirical investigations*. University of Chicago Press.