

## **SABBATICAL REPORT, AUGUST 2017**

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I requested a semester-long sabbatical to begin writing a book that examines how social media is changing the discourse of news about global warming, especially among the least developed nations in the world. I have been very productive over the last six months conducting research and writing on that topic. My aim was to provide important insights into how mediated communication can contribute to building consensus on addressing the problem of climate change. While a project of this magnitude takes more time than a ½ year sabbatical provides, I was able to meet my basic goal to complete one academic article on the subject, which I will be submitting for publication to the peer reviewed Journal of Environmental Communication. I expect to develop that article into a chapter for my book and continue writing.

In taking this sabbatical, I have been able to examine a particularly critical and timely controversy in the world today. It is very exciting to study whether the rise of social media may help vulnerable peoples in poor countries gain a voice in the debate over how we will all survive Climate Change. According to the New York Times, there was a “dispute between rich and poor nations over how to set targets, and who should bear the brunt of the responsibility” (“Emerging Nations Join G-8 on Climate Goal,” Stolberg, p. 2, 7/10/08). After many years of hard work and negotiations, these concerns were finally addressed by the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, that is, until President Trump’s 2016 election led to the withdrawal of the US from the famed accord.

I began my research by conducting an extensive literature review of Critical Discourse Analysis studies, in part to learn about how to conduct this kind literary methodology. I read through the research that examined how global climate change has been framed by the news media in developed and developing nations thus far (Brossard, Shanahan, McComas; Rogers; Lacy, Rife, Varouhakis, Miron; Trumbo; Gans). I have also drawn from non-US literature, and to date, still have plenty to read on the subject, particularly in the area of social media and environmental media campaigns.

After receiving Human Subjects Committee approval, I traveled to Fiji and Tuvalu, one of the smallest countries in the world, in order to collect data on my topic. It was a challenging trip. One reason is that I ended up flying there right in the middle of high tropical cyclone season, which gave me a realistic perspective on the climate change issue. Being there, I began to understand the fear local people said they felt each time the wind blew a little too hard and the waves came in a little too high for comfort. Everyone I met told me things were getting worse every year. It was very sad to imagine that people’s homes, their ancestor’s graves, and entire way of life was going to be covered by the ocean in the very near future and they did not know where they were going to go. To see this happening to people who are already desperately poor is heartbreaking.

Once there, I interviewed local social media experts from non-governmental organizations who worked with their communities on the increasing problems associated with climate change. I gained access to Fijian and Tuvaluan informants by making contact via Facebook with local activist organizations that funded their work through international donors and local churches groups. In Fiji, I worked in the business capital of the country in the city of Suva, an area in which few tourists go. In Tuvalu, I

connected with the local Red Cross, as well as the “Pacific Warriors of 350.org” who developed innovative media campaigns to fight global warming. One particularly salient campaign was born out of the idea that people in the Pacific were not just going to be victims or refugees of climate change, but should instead be considered “Pacific Climate Change Warriors.” The idea was to embrace the Pacific people’s cultural pride within their struggles to stop climate change by using mottos that gave them courage, like: “We are not drowning, we are fighting!”

I travelled to the South Pacific specifically because low lying islands in the region are hypothesized to be among the first at risk for experiencing the negative effects of climate change. Also, Fiji is in charge of running the 2017 UN Conference on Climate Change so the region is an important focal point at this time. It was literally frightening to be there, especially in Tuvalu, which is a tiny, isolated Third World archipelago that actually feels as remote and vulnerable to the elements as it is. Despite the tourist brochures that promise escape on white sandy beaches in Polynesia, countries like Tuvalu, Kiribati and Vanuatu suffer from widespread pollution, droughts, ocean water floods that destroy agriculture, unbearably hot temperatures, and weather events like the tropical cyclone that devastated parts of Fiji in 2016, which, according to locals, are increasing in force and frequency every year.

Upon return to the US, I transcribed my interviews and began to analyze them through applying a Critical Discourse Analysis methodology. In this way, I was able to examine the nature of power relationships that have been personified through the press coverage of the area and the counter-hegemonic voices that were gaining attention through social media. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which serves as both a theory and a method, takes into account the societal contexts in which texts are developed. The approach identifies the selection of actual practices of talking, writing or visual imagery that can be formed into a text and constructed into patterns of social reality (van Dijk, 1988; Fairclough, 1995). These patterns can represent the projection of dominant and subordinate power relationships through discourse, and also identify ideological positions.

In April, I was invited to present my preliminary findings at the SSU School of Art and Humanities Faculty Scholarship Forum. Creating the presentation was an excellent way to develop an outline for use in writing my article. My findings showed that social media did help marginalized groups in the Pacific gain some attention for their concerns, particularly that there needs to be a limit in the rise of global temperature to no more than 2 degrees Centigrade.

There was a complication that seriously affected my sabbatical. During my break, news of President Trump’s agenda and the fact that he took to Twitter to communicate it daily, began to overturn everything that I and all journalists felt we knew about the way to produce news. I was invited by the English department to participate in a panel on how we parse so-called “Fake News,” and that got me motivated to step out of the academic box and also engage in a more creative non-fiction writing about politics, how I felt about the situation and my life, and the media. In response, I followed the news even more closely through traditional sources and online, and I also began to blog about it on a regular basis. It became quickly apparent that a significant sea change had occurred in the field of media, and I realized that the work I was doing based on my original sabbatical proposal would have to be conceptualized through this new paradigm. It was necessary for me to examine not only developing countries and their use of social media but also how developments in US politics were being influenced through social media to affect all nations around the world who are struggling to stop global warming.

Ultimately, I used my time to put into context the way the concerns of the peoples in developing countries under siege from climate change, like those in the Pacific, are working to fight the worldwide apathy, along-side environmentalists in the US who must exist within the periphery of American politics. All are struggling to have a voice in the planning of the future of the planet and each are taking to social media do it.

My sabbatical project benefits SSU in many ways. It gave 19-year veteran SSU faculty member the time necessary to update her knowledge and expertise in not only the area of climate change communication, but also in political journalism and social media. Having the ability to be introspective and focus exclusively on my research has revitalized my excitement for teaching again at SSU 10-fold. I feel that I have tapped back into what originally drew me to my field; my fascination with creativity, journalism, and communication campaigns, particularly as they relate to the classes I teach in media research and methods, media ethics and law, international communications and environmental journalism.

Needless to say, I plan to continue this research and I will present my work on campus and in national and international conferences. Upon publication of the first academic and non-academic pieces I am completing, my accomplishments will help to raise SSU's profile as a leading contributor to the intellectual discourse on international communication and climate change, a topic of great import in today's world. Finally, the support for the international aspect of my research follows the university's mission to engage in greater participation in the globalization of the CSU.

I thank the university for this amazing opportunity. I am profoundly grateful.

Dr. E. Burch