

“How is he entitled to say this?”

Constructing the identities of experts, ordinary people, and presenters in Swedish television series on climate change

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Abstract

In this article, we analyse mediated representations of elite and non-elite voices about climate change, by juxtaposing two Swedish non-fiction television series: one narrates the work of environmental scientists, the other discusses climate change with diverse citizens in a vox pop format. We argue that the discursive practices of these programmes reproduce the antagonistic subject positions of experts and ordinary people, allocating them radically different positions of power in relation to climate change. Whereas the experts are presented as actors of change with the knowledge to solve the crisis, ordinary people are shown as passive recipients of advice and moral judgment, in need of change. In addition, we highlight the role of media professionals in these articulations. The article shows how these subject positions support persuasionist strategies, but also how the elite/non-elite juxtaposition tends to exclude the latter from a meaningful engagement on equal terms.

Keywords: elite, ordinary people, climate change, persuasionism, discourse theory

Introduction

Issues related to climate change have dominated the global agenda for a considerable amount of time. The discursive struggles over the meaning of climate change and the problematisations it entails have a similarly long lifespan. Invested with antagonisms, the notion of climate change circulates in a variety of societal fields, including academia, politics, everyday life, and – the focus of this paper – the media.

The starting point of our article is that the discourse of climate-change-as-problem (i.e., a discourse that articulates climate change as a phenomenon that requires attention, resources, and thought) has become hegemonic, even though the exact nature of the problem – and of required measures and their implementations – remains highly contested. Nevertheless, the ideological dominance of this interpretative frame motivates

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different societal fields to organise responses to this acute problematisation and to assist in searching for solutions (however imperfect), thereby protecting the hegemony of climate-change-as-problem. In the case of the media field, we can see an increase of media content production that deals with human–nature relations, witnessed by a rise in popularity of the (sub)genre of the environmental (or green) documentary (Duvall, 2017). In this article, we focus on two Swedish non-fiction television series: *Briljanta forskare* [*Brilliant Scientists*] (Sundström, 2019) and *Koll på klimatet* [*Checking on the Climate*] (Arén, 2019).

Our interest in these two television series is particular. In the hegemonic context of climate-change-as-problem, these series are interventions that aim to protect and strengthen this hegemony, but also to translate this hegemonic discourse into material social action (“solutions”). Within a democratic context – Sweden – the series become examples of the ideology of persuasionism, where a diversity of arguments is used to achieve the change deemed necessary. Persuasionism is a fairly uncommon concept, used in rhetoric, (social) marketing, and political theory, to refer to the ideological project that motivates and legitimates active intervention of key social actors in the construction of social reality. As Andreasen (1995: 11) writes: “Thus, the goal of the persuasionist is to discover the careful arguments and motivational hot buttons that will get the educated consumer to ‘get off the dime’”. Persuasionism thus defends the use (and necessity) of communication to change preferences (O’Mahoney, 2017) to attempt to generate hegemonic consensus (e.g., about the discourse of climate-change-as-problem). Hardly used in communication and media studies, this concept can still be seen as a less judgmental version of the “manufacturing consent” argument (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Its focus on change also aligns it with discussions on social responsibility and pro-social influence of media (see Christians et al., 2009; McQuail, 1992). We should note that there are many different levels of persuasion in persuasionism. We use it here in a democratic context, but persuasionism has also been used to describe much harsher social interventions, for instance, by Mao (1997: 678) to describe Soviet prison practices.

Arguably, one vital component of persuasionism is the construction of the identity – or, in the discourse-theoretical vocabulary, subject position – of the actors involved in the mediation process, namely experts, ordinary people, and media professionals. Persuasionism, for instance, can have the change of subject positions as its objective. Some subject positions also legitimate the use of persuasionist strategies. Our analysis looks into the construction of these subject positions and how this construction is structured by, and conducive of, persuasionism. Through the deployment of persuasionist strategies, the television series aim not only to have (ordinary) people identify with the climate-change-as-problem discourse, but also to align their material behaviour accordingly.

Discourse theory as a toolbox for empirical analysis

To support our analysis of the two Swedish television series, we rely on Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985/2014) discourse theory (DT) as a theoretical toolbox. DT provides us with a conceptual lens that combines the instability, versatility, and performativity of subject positions (from which statements are made), but also the (attempted) he-

gemonisations and fixations of these subject positions, thus allowing us to unpack the workings of discursive power. Indeed, DT views discourse not only as language use at the microlevel, but as structured ideological representations (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Discourses are constructed through the practice of articulation, which combines elements from the broad discursive field – a reservoir of available meanings – into a structured totality: Consider, for instance, the way in which the signifier “carbon footprint” may (or may not) be incorporated into a discourse on climate. This example is helpful because it immediately highlights the inherent contestability and unfixity of discourses, where they can always be undermined by attempts to change their particular articulations and where they are challenged by competing discourses. Articulation, therefore, can also take the forms of rearticulation and disarticulation, where various discourses seek to appropriate elements of each other in the Gramscian mode of a “war of position” (Mouffe, 1979/2014), creating the dynamic process of discursive struggles. In DT, the social field is thus seen as “crisscrossed by antagonistic forces” (Torfing, 1999: 101), bringing relations of difference to the front of discourse analysis.

Relations of difference are central to DT, and they also inform DT’s particular perspective on identity formation. Two points about identity are specifically relevant. First, inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis, DT views the subject as split and, consequently, consisting of a plurality of subject positions that together constitute an always incomplete subject. Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2014: 101) define these subject positions in the following terms:

Whenever we use the category of “subject” in this text, we will do so in the sense of “subject positions” within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations – not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible – as all “experience” depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility.

Hence, there is no stable single identity, but a series of subject positions (articulated in discourses), offered for identification to subjects. An individual, in this sense, generates their subjectivity by identifying with many, always particular, subject positions – the expert, the worker, the woman, the citizen, and so on – which enable their representation and provide a “horizon of social orientation and action” (Torfing, 1999: 101). These subject positions themselves are not stable, as they feature in different discourses and receive their different (and sometimes contradictory) meanings. For instance, what it means to be a consumer varies significantly, depending on this signifier’s embeddedness in an anthropocentric or an ecocentric discourse. Still, similar to discourses, subject positions are also subjected to hegemonising tendencies and persuasionist strategies that aim to fixate the meaning of these signifiers in a particular way. In the same example of the consumer, we can see how the discursive-material assemblage of capitalism has fixated the subject position of the consumer, rendering it difficult (but not impossible) to articulate the subject position of the consumer with an ecocentric discourse.

Second, the negative relationality of identity constructions implies their necessary articulation against external others – their *constitutive outsides* – by principle of differentiation. The us–them distinction, conflictual though it may seem, is understood as the very condition for subjectivity, which cannot exist without the presence of a radical

difference (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Mouffe, 2005). At the same time, the constitutive outside threatens the subject, whose existence is dependent on the (constructed) stability of the discourse that provides it with particular subject positions (Laclau, 1990). In this article, we reflect on the antagonistic relationship between the subject positions of experts and ordinary people, the stability of which relies on an ongoing mutual articulation. We also analyse the subject position of the presenter, which – in a media context – combines elements of both aforementioned subject positions.

The construction of the subject positions of experts, ordinary people, and the presenter from a DT perspective

The mediated construction of experts, ordinary people, and media professionals has received considerable attention in the academic literature in and beyond the field of media studies. This enables us to briefly revisit their articulations and mutual dependencies. While some analyses of the articulations of expertise are rooted in an essentialist reading of what it “is” (Chi et al., 2014), other accounts emphasise the performative character of the notion (Johri, 2015). Studying mediated representations of experts on Belgian television, Carpentier (2011: 191) argues that knowledgeability (contrasted with having opinions) is the key trait of an expert subject position, which is in turn supported by their embeddedness in a particular professional and institutional context, often made explicit to the viewer. For instance, Thornborrow (2001) argues that – in audience participation programmes – the names, positions, and institutional affiliations of individuals that are placed in expert (subject) positions become accentuated.

A recent study on the mediation of expertise on climate change in the UK (Coen et al., 2021) identified its expressions in claiming the entitlement to knowledge, the use of expert language, the construction of statements as factual, appeals to common sense, and the presentation of solutions. At the same time, the very content of expert statements on climate change varies depending on the political and cultural context. Expert interventions in the media in many European countries tend to take an alarmist tone in arguing for climate change action, as previous studies have shown in Austria (Hermann et al., 2017), Britain (Schmid-Petri & Arlt, 2016), Germany (Grundmann & Scott, 2014; Taddicken & Reif, 2016), and – especially importantly for our article – Sweden (Berglez et al., 2009). Other contexts have seen a stronger presence of climate change sceptics – for example, in the US (Boykoff, 2013), but also France (Grundmann & Scott, 2014). These discrepancies in framing one of the central issues of our time point to the need for analysing how expertise is performed, how the subject position of an expert is assumed, and how legitimacy for the expressed statements is constructed.

The subject position of the media professional may be considered a partial extension of the subject position of the expert, since expertise is articulated into media professionalism in terms of professional and technical knowledge (Chen, 2020: 75). Drawing primarily on a Chinese media context, Chen also singles out the storyteller as a nodal point in the media professional subject position, which consists of creating a narrative flow and connecting to the audience, but also performing the media professional identity through bodily positionings, styling, and dress. Another nodal point of the media professional subject position (in relation to news production) consists of upholding journalistic values, unpacked in the hegemonic discourse through objectivity (Carpentier,

2005; Deuze, 2005; Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2017; Westerståhl, 1983), autonomy (Berkowitz, 2009; Berkowitz et al., 2004; Deuze, 2005), belonging to a professional media organisation (Carpentier, 2005), and a differential position towards the audience (see Filimonov, 2021: 68). The diversity of these ways to construct the media professional subject position (and the diversity of the articulations of their nodal points) is captured in some typologies of journalistic milieus¹ (Hanitzsch, 2007; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). For instance, Hanitzsch (2011) captures the contingency of the media professional subject position by referring to what he calls four role clusters: the populist disseminator, the detached watchdog, the critical change agent, and the opportunist facilitator. In our analysis, we return specifically to the critical change agent, as this articulation of the professional subject position is deeply intertwined with persuasionism.

In turn, the subject position of the ordinary person can be seen as the constitutive outside of the expert and the media professional subject positions. Although the frontier between experts and media professionals on the one hand and ordinary people on the other is not rigid but contextually dependent (see, e.g., Eriksson & Thornborrow, 2016, on the rise of the “ordinary expertise”), traditional media representations of ordinary people tend to articulate them as non-elite, while experts and media professionals are positioned as societal elites, with different forms of capital (Carpentier, 2014). In this representation, ordinary people are opposed to experts and media professionals (by being disarticulated from expertise and knowledge), to celebrities (by being disarticulated from fame), and, more generally, to the category of newsworthiness (Syvertsen, 2001; Turner, 2010).

The supposed lack of knowledge, coupled with apathy and denial, is one particularly persistent pattern of citizens’ representation in relation to the climate agenda (Carvalho, 2010; Höppner, 2010). Moreover, the media representation of ordinary people follows the double pattern of aggregation and individualisation. On the one hand, ordinary people may be represented as an atomised mass, without knowledge and power (Carpentier, 2011). On the other hand, there is a pattern of individualisation, which disconnects ordinary people from the embeddedness in societal institutions, again in contrast to members of societal elites whose institutional affiliations are emphasised.

The construction of ordinary people as powerless and unknowledgeable justifies social control; for instance, public shaming of individuals involved in minor crimes by news media has been studied as a disciplining phenomenon of the digital age (Hess & Waller, 2014; Waller & Hess, 2011). In relation to the climate, this pattern has recently been discussed in light of the Swedish neologism *flygskam* [flight shame], which refers to instilling a sense of guilt in the members of the public for choosing to use airplanes as their mode of transportation, thereby contributing to CO₂ emissions in the atmosphere (Becken et al., 2021; Chiambaretto et al., 2021; Mkono, 2020).

Data and method

The two television series

Our study is based on the analysis of three episodes each of two television series, *Briljanta forskare* [*Brilliant Scientists*] (*BF*) and *Koll på klimatet* [*Checking on the Climate*] (*KPK*). Both series are mainly in Swedish (quotes used here were translated

into English by the first author), although a few scientists in *BF* speak English, accompanied by Swedish subtitles.

The popular-scientific series *BF* was aired in 2019 by the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company [Sveriges Utbildningsradio] (UR), in a production overseen by SVT, the Swedish national public television broadcaster. The series features popular descriptions of ongoing research in natural science and, according to its official description (UR, n.d.), chiefly targets young adults in the final years of elementary school. The total of ten episodes was released and made available to the public on the UR webpage (urplay.se) for four subsequent years after the release. A purposeful selection of three episodes that discussed climate-related issues was made for this study (as opposed, for instance, to *BF*'s episodes on antibiotics or space debris). Each of these episodes lasted for 9 minutes and primarily consisted of interventions made by scientists who were involved in the research projects covered by the programme. The episode entitled "Fusionskraft" ["Fusion Power"] (BF-E1) presents research of alternatives to fossil fuels as a source of energy, with the focus on the international megaproject ITER, which seeks to replicate the fusion processes on the Sun to generate energy on Earth. The episode "CO₂-dammsugaren" ["CO₂ Vacuum Cleaner"] (BF-E2) addresses the threats related to the excessive production of carbon dioxide and presents an ongoing scientific project in Iceland, which aims to capture CO₂ directly from the atmosphere and convert it into harmless minerals. Lastly, the episode "Plastcirkeln" ["Plastic Circle"] (BF-E3) problematises the overconsumption of plastic and talks about Swedish researchers working on creating a 3D printer capable of producing sustainable plastic. The three episodes were transcribed and complemented with a 40-minute interview (recorded in English) with an anonymised senior member of the *BF* production team (Producer 1), who was informed about the purpose of the conversation and agreed to be recorded and cited.

KPK was produced and distributed by SVT in 2019. At the time of data collection, the episodes were no longer accessible on the SVT website (svtplay.se), but three of them were shared with us by a member of the production team after receiving a briefing from our side. Each episode is 7–9 minutes long, and in each, the presenter Babiker Malik discusses climate and sustainability issues with individuals in Sweden who hold "completely different attitudes to climate change", according to the series' official description (SVT, n.d.). The three analysed episodes take us to Gothenburg (*KPK*-E1), Stockholm (*KPK*-E2), and Malmö (*KPK*-E3), where Malik meets climate activists, children in a kindergarten, a social media influencer, and a few anonymous individuals who talk about the environment. He also actively engages with their comments, sharing his personal opinion with the programme's viewers.

Method

As previously mentioned, our selection relied on theoretical sampling, as we were interested in the construction of particular subject positions in the two television series in general, and how they connected to persuasionism in particular. This resulted in a selection of the (theoretically and thematically) most relevant episodes. We then applied a discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA) (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; Van Brussel et al., 2019). DTA uses DT as theoretical foundation, but combines it with an abductive

research strategy, which is based on an iterative procedure of theory selection, data collection, and analysis, and a subsequent theory refinement with the help of the gathered data (Reichert, 2019). Thus, the researcher remains focused on a particular theoretical problem while allowing the data to unveil new narratives about the social reality at hand.

In our case, the abductive strategy consisted of the following steps. First, upon the completion of the transcription process, the theoretical categories stemming from discourse theory were established (subject positions, discourse, and articulation) and their specific properties in relation to the case study were tentatively defined. We were primarily interested in the positions of experts versus ordinary people, and the place of the presenter in that relationship. Second, the academic literature in relation to the respective subject positions was reviewed to identify possible articulations. Third, a qualitative content analysis was performed on the data, consisting of iterative cycles of breaking down the material into categories and codes that answered our research question: How are subject positions constructed in the television series and how is this construction structured by, and conducive of, persuasionism? Here, we were interested in elements that constructed their subject positions, such as the statements the participants and presenter made, their vocabularies, the ways they were labelled, addressed, and interacted, and the material setting in which the scene was recorded. Fourth, completing the abductive circles, we reviewed the properties of the previously chosen theoretical categories, adding the missing elements which emerged from the data (more specifically, including the subject position of the media professional). The analytical output was then divided in three parts, each corresponding to one of the key subject positions from our analysis.

The representations of the three subject positions in the television series

The subject position of experts

The construction of the subject position of the expert is primarily evident in *BF*, where scientists take centre stage. Here, the expert possesses a series of distinctive characteristics that puts them in a differential position in relation to other subject positions (e.g., that of media professional), as Producer 1 made explicit in their interview: “This is not a person that has an opinion. This is a researcher and there is something behind his thoughts and his knowledge, and this is not a journalist having this opinion. That was very important”.

The experts are primarily articulated as knowledge producers who are authorised and legitimated to persuade the viewers through rational argumentation. The way the experts communicate their knowledgeability and perform persuasionism has a logic that largely overlaps with Entman’s (1993) well-known framework of journalistic framing: providing a problem definition, suggesting their own evaluation, presenting solutions, and adding a moral assessment about what course of action is considered proper.² To illustrate the expert’s problem definition capacity, in *BF-E1* the entrepreneur Markus Wråke suggests that “the big problem with much of today’s electricity production is that we extract coal from the soil then burn it and release it into the atmosphere instead [...] This is the big problem”. In *BF-E2*, the engineer Emily Calandrelli states that “the

problem isn't the greenhouse gases. The problem is the rate at which we are emitting it".

Once the problem is defined, the experts are invited to provide their evaluation, which they sometimes do in categorical terms: "A bag used for a quarter of an hour will probably last for 100 years. This is very unreasonable" (Bethanie C. Almroth, BF-E3); "Dumping all that carbon dioxide into the atmosphere is simply not sustainable" (Frances H. Arnold, BF-E1). In addition to problem definition and evaluation, the experts are articulated as people in position for providing a moral judgment: "It's really important as human beings, as people living on this planet, that we have to respect it"; "The way we dispose of the plastic is very irresponsible"; "If you see someone throwing garbage out, give them the murder look" (Melanie Despeisse, BF-E3). Finally, the expert subject position is unpacked in terms of providing remedies. At times, this is made in a solutionist logic, for example, as the geologist Sandra Ósk Snæbjörnsdóttir (BF-E2) says: "The most important thing to keep in mind is that we have the solutions. We just have to use them to solve the climate crisis". As individuals with tools to solve the most challenging and complicated problems, the experts are close to being represented as magicians: "I think this technology is getting quite powerful, like magic" (Melanie Despeisse, BF-E3).

Subjectified as individuals equipped with extraordinary problem-solving capacities, and without structural discrepancies in the knowledge they (collectively) communicate, the experts are delegated the authority to provide recommendations for ordinary people, as they directly address the audience and actively encourage them to change their behaviour, in the following terms:

Our planet is being overrun by our waste products and we definitely need to invent new ways of behaving. (Frances H. Arnold, BF-E3)

Each and every one of us has to stop buying so much stuff, we have to stop eating so much meat, driving so much in our cars and flying so much in our planes. (Sandra Ósk Snæbjörnsdóttir, BF-E2)

One of the messages that I have for people is: When you see that waste, go pick it up. It doesn't cost you much energy, much effort to do it, but it really makes a difference. Maybe you are not the cause of the problem, but you can pick it up. I like to tell people: please be an everyday hero and collect it. That's it. It's that easy. (Melanie Despeisse, BF-E3)

In particular (and certainly influenced by the target audience of the series), young adults are allocated agency to implement these changes, without moving outside the power dynamics of the programme, where the experts still set the stage through their recommendations. On one occasion, a scientist looks directly in the camera, addressing the imaginary audience: "I think the true heroes are the new generation. It's you who will come up with new ideas, and test and question the way people have done things" (Robin Teigland, BF-E3). This sentiment was echoed in another episode as well: "For the young people, the world will be the world that you create. And you have to be involved in its creation" (Frances H. Arnold, BF-E2).

Moreover, the expert subject position is constructed through a number of other characteristics that also strengthen their persuasionist capacities. First, credibility was

deemed crucial. This was emphasised by Producer 1: “[The audience members] want to know who this expert is, why he is talking in this programme and how he is entitled to say this and to have credibility in this topic”. In order to accentuate the reliability of the interviewed scientists, the series puts an emphasis on their presentation. All of them are called by their full names, and their affiliation – either to universities or industrial research projects – is clearly indicated. Although only a handful of the respondents in the analysed episodes are said to be working in academia, their academic titles – doctor or professor – are also provided (in the three episodes, there is only one interviewee without a formal academic title). As Producer 1 explained in our research interview, “If you are a doctor or professor, it kind of gives credibility and a level to the programme, to take it seriously”.

The experts are also constructed as such through the language they use, and more specifically through the comprehensibility and eloquence of their interventions (as we will show, especially the appearance of the experts in *BF* as eloquent is the result of a careful curation – indeed, construction – of such an image by the production team). On the one hand, the targeting of the programme towards a younger audience – considered less knowledgeable – encouraged a higher degree of comprehensibility of its content, and the explanations by the scientists. The latter also appear articulate and well-spoken, which Producer 1 said was an important part of the filming process: “They have to start and end a sentence well. They can’t just say: ‘Yes, that’s it’. They can’t answer yes or no, they have to start in a clear way so we can cut it well”. On the other hand, the expertise is still performed through the use of specialised jargon and concepts such as “carbon dioxide”, “circular economy”, or “gastrointestinal tract”. The series does not discourage the use of the professional vocabulary, but rather clarifies it for the viewers.

The subject position of the expert is furthermore articulated through the qualities of humbleness and generosity – in other words, the ability to engage in a societal discussion and education on equal terms with the public.

It demands a lot of me but it also demands a lot of them to be open and to not be too, how do you say, protective of what they know [...] The purpose has to be here and to not have a big ego about it. And I am happy we could find these people that... you know, even the Nobel prize winners put their ego aside to answer these questions to make this programme as good as possible. (Producer 1)

Lastly, the subjectification of the experts is strengthened by the visual aesthetics, which allows for the most immediate performance of the subject position. The scientists appear to be interviewed in formal settings such as offices, and some wear suits or dresses. Furthermore, their interviews are intermeshed with video fragments where the interviewees and their colleagues can often be seen working in laboratories or construction sites, wearing professional protective equipment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Researcher Melanie Windridge at a construction site (BF-E1)



The subject position of ordinary people

As discussed earlier, the expert subject position – as can be found in *BF* – is based on a differential, even antagonistic, relationship towards other subject positions, particularly individuals discursively constructed as unknowledgeable and influenceable. This system of distinctions can be illustrated through the analysis of a different programme that focuses on ordinary people. An example of this type of programme in Sweden is *KPK*, where ordinary people are constructed as a passive object of a necessary change, some of whom need to be persuaded to change their behaviour.

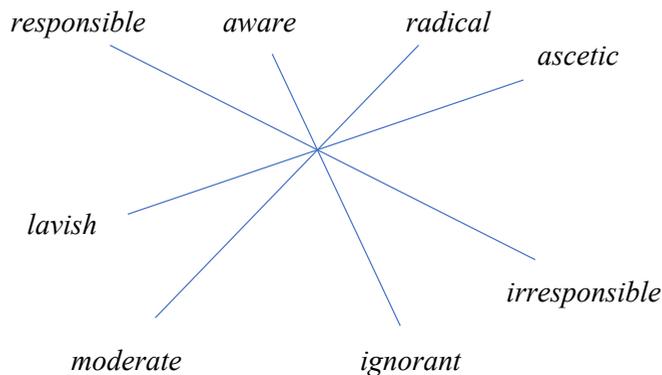
The “ordinariness” of the *KPK* participants is underscored by the use of only first names, when names are even mentioned. Of the 14 individuals interviewed in the three episodes (including four children), only three have their names mentioned and the others remain anonymous, presented to us as part of an aggregated mass outside of social institutions. In the three cases where first names are used, two individuals feature more prominently than others: the activist Karolina, due to her active, radical social stance, and the social media influencer Jennie, because of her consumerist lifestyle. While these may not be counted as ordinary people unreservedly, and their respective identities may require further elaboration (which exceeds the scope of this article), we nonetheless argue for their inclusion into the properties of this subject position – perhaps as the “extraordinary ordinary” – because they share many characteristics with other *KPK* participants in this category.

The positions of the ordinary people in *KPK* are presented to us, in the programme, in a form of cacophony, which further articulates their interventions as opinions and not knowledge. While the scientists in *BF* appear united in their diagnosis of the larger issue at hand and only occasionally disagree on the specific methods of tackling it, *KPK* suggests the existence of a broad variety of opinions among nonexperts. Some of them are acknowledged for taking the matter seriously (and become examples for others), while others virtually deny the need for climate action altogether (and symbolise those that still need to be persuaded). Taken together, these perspectives form a set of what

can be called axes of ordinariness (see Figure 2), which vary from responsible to irresponsible, from lavish to ascetic, from radical to moderate and from aware to ignorant. While some options are explicitly named, others are implied. To illustrate, KPK-E1 features Extinction Rebellion activists who willingly break the law for their radical street performance; in KPK-E3, we are reminded of dumpster diving for food. These solutions are presented to the viewers as extreme, even though they provide testimony of the importance and acceptance of the discourse of climate-change-as-problem. This tension is resolved by showing that more moderate alternatives are at hand: “This is not really allowed [in Sweden], but people do it anyway [...] But if you don’t want to break the law and, like, find food elsewhere, are there any alternatives then?” (KPK-E3). The series then goes on to introduce a couple that collects hazelnuts in a forest, trying to “think environmentally” and “live sustainably” (KPK-E3).

Figure 2

The representations of diversity as part of the ordinary people subject position in KPK



While the palette of characteristics of ordinary people is rich, *KPK* demonstrates persuasionist strategies by making moral judgments and by discrediting particular voices that do not align with the discourse of climate-change-as-problem. This contributes to the construction of ordinary people as objects of persuasion and change, deemed necessary in the name of sustainability. In *KPK*, this is very much in line with the name-and-shame pattern of media coverage discussed earlier. In particular, the blogger named Jennie and her lavish, consumerist lifestyle is presented as the undesirable model. Here, the audience is taken on a walk around one of Stockholm’s most expensive quays, Strandvägen, where the host tells Jennie that consumption is “really, really a problem” and asks about her spending habits; she admits to owning a Chanel bag worth over SEK 40,000 (EUR 3,800). The flight-shaming pattern is also present in their interaction, where Jennie is pressed to explain her travel choices (KPK-E2): Presenter: From what I can see on Jennie’s Insta[gram profile], she travels a lot. And no matter how much you twist and turn it, air travel is actually a real environmental culprit.

Jennie: I have come to realise that my long-haul travel does the environment a disservice.

Presenter: OK. And are you going on any long-haul travel this summer?

Jennie: No, it will be within Europe. Though Israel is not in Europe, I just realised.

Presenter: No.

Jennie: No, there will be one [trip] outside of Europe.

Presenter: OK. What would have made you not take the plane then?

Jennie: If they arranged some kind of high-speed trains, like they have in Asia, or the politicians are saying that we are now going to decrease flights because of remorse, then I would absolutely think about that [...]

Presenter: But if there were other alternatives and other destinations, would that have been a solution? A so-called staycation?

The “staycation” theme remains present in other interactions of the host with the programme’s participants: Not only Jennie, but also others are encouraged to change their travel habits and visit domestic destinations instead of going abroad.

The subject position of ordinary people is also supported by a series of aesthetic features that construct it as different from experts and the production of knowledge. Also here, the stylistic contrasts with the representation of experts in *BF* is quite remarkable. While *BF* is filmed in formal settings, showing us scientists at work, *KPK* participants mostly appear in more private contexts, such as an ambush interview at an apartment’s front door, or a walk with the host. Unlike the experts who frequently use professional jargon, the *KPK* series resorts to a conversational style. Furthermore, compared with the articulate scientists who masterfully use English and Swedish – even though they are often foreign languages for them – the ordinary participants in *KPK* are most often visibly not trained in speaking in front of a camera. At times, they appear mumbling and inconsistent, articulating their interventions as fragmented opinions, not grounded in knowledge. We find an example, again, in Jennie’s answer to a question about her views on climate change, whose approximate translation into English follows below (KPK-E2):

No, but then I’m thinking like this, that yes, but it’s gonna get better ‘cos the sun has its spots, I often think. Now we are maybe in the warmer part, you know. And I don’t know. It’s like this, we used to think that the Earth was flat, and now, like... And I know that scientists... I know 100% that it’s really bad with the environment, but I always think that everything will be fine.

The subject position of the presenter

The third subject position is that of the media professional, in particular the presenter. This subject position is especially visible in *KPK*, which, as has been previously mentioned, has a host who actively interacts with both the programme participants and the television audience. However, this subject position is also present in *BF* – both as a voiceover and an invisible part of the production process, whose importance was brought up by a senior production team member at our research interview. We analyse

the construction of the presenter’s subject position with the theoretical notion of media professional in mind, which helps us to better understand the enactments of their identity in the television series.

The articulations and performances of the presenter in *KPK* have a number of important links to ordinary people, establishing the logic of relatability. The host uses an informal tone, reacting to the participants’ answers in a lighthearted way, with remarks such as “Vad nice” [“How nice”] or “Kul!” [“Fun!”]. The interjection “typ” [“like”] is not only part of spontaneous interactions of the presenter with the programme participants (e.g., in *KPK-E3*, he asks, “What would you say is, like, most vital for you?”), but is also used on the voiceover, appearing as a conscious effort to connect with the (younger) audience. The approachability of the presenter is further strengthened by his playful – and, at times, openly ironic – approach to the subjects at hand, such as when he suggests that the viewers visit the Swedish town of Jönköping, 130 kilometres east of Gothenburg, instead of going to Jerusalem (*KPK-E2*).

Furthermore, the presenter expresses sympathy for the other “ordinary people”, such as a driver whose car is blocked by Extinction Rebellion activists in *KPK-E1* (“I would have been so angry if I were the guy who’s sitting next to me in the car right now”). He also demonstrates his relatability in *KPK-E3* by admitting his modest apartment size, which he says amounts to 35 square metres. His humility also comes forward through the careful selection of words for expressing his opinion (*KPK-E1*): “*My feeling*, however, is that many [activists] *maybe* would have wanted more chaos and *maybe* some detentions by police. Oh well, *what do I know*, it’s *just my own thoughts* [emphasis added]”.

The iterative association with ordinary people in *KPK* is combined with his (rather didactic) articulation as a “critical change agent” (Hanitzsch, 2011) and the use of persuasionist strategies. Through the use of irony, the presenter continuously responds through – and thus privileges – a discourse on sustainable living, making the grotesque appear entertaining and, after all, possible. Consider, for instance, this fragment where the host reacts to a participant’s wish to go to Spain for vacation, appearing on the screen with a backdrop of a beach: “Oh, the sun. Mmm, pensioners. Mallis.³ You know what brings me anxiety? Flight hours [to get] there. So, I choose the city of palms, Trelleborg”⁴ (*KPK-E2*). By actively intervening, the host positions himself as a persuasionist actor of change (and a mediator of expert discourses). At the same time, he continuously reproduces the notion of the ordinary people as an object of change through his media professional subject position, which allows him to oscillate between mediating the position of an expert and an ordinary person. Performing a bridge between experts and ordinary people, the television presenter protects the autonomy and critical distance that characterises his subject position. This bridging effort also allows him to avoid in-depth argumentation, while still communicating action deemed necessary:

[My] gut feeling tells me that it makes a difference to be aware and think about one’s travel and to opt out of the flights and to take the train instead and even [opt out of] the very purchase. So, in a way, I think that it still makes a difference. (*KPK-E2*)

I should probably be more aware and think twice before I travel anywhere. Perhaps I should skip that New York trip and stop buying new stuff and throwing plastic here and there. (*KPK-E1*)

In *BF*, revealing the inner workings of the filming, Producer 1 emphasised the efforts undertaken to prepare for each interview with the scientists: “For every one of these interviews I had to be very well-researched to pose good questions and questions that they would respect”. This enactment of the media professional subject position also imposed certain limitations on the power of the expert subject position, forcing it to adjust to the media professional norms – for instance, with regard to the targeted audience and time limits: “You have to direct [the scientists] and you have to explain that ‘OK, could you please rephrase that sentence because we have to make people understand and we only have this amount of time?’” (Producer 1).

The articulation of the media professional in *BF* and *KPK* as powerful and knowledgeable was particularly visible in the occasional enactments of gatekeeping, as a practice of control over access and storyline. One important element is that voices unresponsive of the discourse of climate-change-as-problem were not included in the expert position. Gatekeeping also impacts on the presence of legitimate experts – or those considered as such: Producer 1 of *BF* recalled the struggle to make scientists who were “lacking in energy” adjust to the standards of a television show. Not everyone made it onto the screen, and the final decision rested with the media professionals: “There are some people you see not so many times [on the screen], but we have a lot more [footage], but it didn’t qualify. So, you have to be very picky with what you include. And only take the best” (Producer 1). Interestingly, in one instance, the articulation of the presenter as a gatekeeper was rendered particularly explicit: When four children participants said “Welcome” to the *KPK* host as he entered the kindergarten, he quickly reclaimed power: “But this is my programme, why are you saying ‘welcome’?” The practices of gatekeeping in the programmes do not only construct the presenter as a separate subject position but remind us of their power in shaping the narrative of the entire series.

Conclusion

The representations of the three subject positions in the Swedish television series on climate change are grounded in the opposition of experts versus ordinary people, while the subject position of the media professional plays a mediating role, without giving up on their articulations as powerful and knowledgeable (in relation to media production). As the analysis above shows, the articulations of these three subject positions are constituted out of multiple elements. For this reason, summarised results of the analysis are presented in Table 1. The articulations of these three subject positions, when compared with the literature, appear to be quite stable over time and place, at least in a Western context, even if some divergences do occur. The crucial distinction between elite and non-elite subject positions – or, in other words, between the power bloc and ordinary people (Hall, 1981) – can be considered hegemonic. It is also very present in both programmes analysed.

Arguably, these constructions support a democratic version of the ideology of persuasionism, where credible voices need to be mobilised but also created to allow for the process of persuasion to take place. Moreover, they position media professionals as mediators between experts and ordinary people, ensuring the translation of (often complicated) academic discussions in eloquently formulated and comprehensive arguments. But these particular constructions do come with limits, as the construction of the subject

Table 1
Mediated representations of three subject positions in television series on climate change

	Experts	Ordinary people	Media professional (presenter)
Role	Actors of persuasion and change	Objects of persuasion and change	Actor and organiser of persuasion and change (“critical change agent”; Hanitzsch, 2011)
	Provider of advice and moral judgment	Recipient of advice and moral judgment	Provider of advice and moral judgment
Activity level	Active	Mostly passive (but still empowered to speak)	Active (e.g., as gatekeeper)
Knowledge-ability	Speak from the position of authority and knowledge, with a singular perspective	Diverse opinions (as opposed to “knowledge”)	Bridges the experts and the ordinary people, but authoritative and knowledgeable in relation to media production
Independence	Autonomous	Influenceable	Autonomous
Mode of presentation	Credible (full names, titles, affiliation, awards)	Mostly anonymous	Credible (full name, role in the production process in credits)
Language	Specialised jargon, confident, well-spoken	Colloquial language use, nervous, inconsistent	Translator of jargon, confident, well-spoken
Material context	Professional	Private	Hybrid

position of ordinary people, however empowered they are, still locks them into a more passive role, engulfed by multitude. Secondly, the individualisation of climate change accountability, which follows from the focus on ordinary people, brings the series – in particular, *Koll på klimatet* – to overlook the more structural conditions for climate change as well as the disproportionate distribution of responsibility, which largely fall on the existing social inequalities. One minor example is that, although private foreign trips are frequently mentioned, there is no indication of private jets and their owners. Also in the discussions of CO₂ emissions, the large industries that contribute to environmental pollution are not mentioned. Instead, individual citizens, represented as part of an aggregated mass, are portrayed as the ultimate bearers of responsibility who need to take action communicated to them by the experts, who are seen as embodying authority and knowledge. Inviting “ordinary people” to partake in the discussion on these unequal terms, the media still, as Carvalho (2010: 175) critically observed regarding climate coverage a decade earlier, “do not recognize citizens as worthy speakers on the substance of collective problems”. In the two analysed Swedish television series, the tension between public participation in pertinent social discussions and the discursive power of expertise remains present.

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Notes

1. Most typologies use a different language, but can still be easily integrated in the DT approach we are using here.
2. These moral judgements demonstrate that also experts are part of hegemonic processes (which is not necessarily problematic), and that absolute neutrality cannot be achieved.
3. An informal Swedish name for Mallorca – here, used mainly in an ironic way.
4. Trelleborg, in southern Sweden, is known for its imported palm trees, although the programme participants do not show awareness of this fact.

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