

## Story+World: Changing Stories for a Changing Planet

### “Why Narrative Matters in the Fight Against Climate Change”

#### *Episode Transcript*

[intro]

**Liv Slaby:** [00:00:00] Today's episode marks the beginning of a new direction for the LENS podcast, now named *Story+World: Changing Stories for a Changing Planet*. This is the first in a series of conversations between LENS scholars and writers, artists, scientists, activists, and others whose work relates to LENS's goal of understanding how today's environmental challenges connect to longer histories of imagining the natural world. This conversation with climate journalist Sammy Roth was recorded live at UCLA with an audience. Thank you for listening and we hope you enjoy the episode.

[conversation]

**Jon Christensen:** Hello and welcome to *Story+World: Changing Stories for a Changing Planet*, a podcast of the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies at UCLA. My name is Jon Christensen, I'm the director of LENS and I'm here with [00:01:00] my colleagues, Ursula K. Heise, who's a Distinguished Professor in the English department and one of the founders of LENS, and Liv Slaby, who's the producer of the LENS podcast and is a PhD student here at UCLA in the English Department. Our guest today, Sammy Roth, is a veteran distinguished journalist, an environmental journalist covering climate change for the *Desert Sun* and *USA Today Network* before coming to the *Los Angeles Times*. And then recently, embarking on his own venture called—

**Sammy Roth:** Climate Colored Goggles. I gave it a little bit of a mouthful of a name.

**Jon Christensen:** Sorry about that. At LENS, we're super interested in the stories that people tell about the [00:02:00] environment, in different languages and cultures, histories, political situations—understanding those different narratives. Both because it's important to understand how people think about the environment and about climate change, in different ways, but also if we want to communicate effectively, understanding the stories that people tell is super important. So when we heard about your new adventure, Sammy, we were really excited that you're also looking at climate, energy, transportation, agriculture, all of those things related to climate change through the lens of stories and entertainment, media and sports. We thought, wow, this is great, we should have a conversation. Welcome, we're glad to have you with us today.

**Sammy Roth:** Thanks very much for having me here. And, I'm glad you understand what I'm trying to do because I think there were definitely some folks who [00:03:00] saw that I was leaving the *Los Angeles Times* and thought, oh, that's confusing, why would he do that? But the fact that you get the mission, we're starting off on a good foot here, so I appreciate that.

**Jon Christensen:** Oh, we've been big fans of your work at the *Times*. But also excited, really excited to see you venture off into this new project, thinking about climate change and narratives. It's just so important. These days it's so interesting the different narratives that people tell about themselves and the environment and climate change in particular. And the work those narratives do. It's interesting, but it also

can be very perplexing and vexing. Like, seeing the many different contradictory stories that are being told about the [00:04:00] environment and climate change these days, where climate change is one of the most politically polarizing words in the American political lexicon. So, a great field to be involved in.

**Sammy Roth:** Yeah, it's a little bit weird. I think people have asked me before, what got you interested in climate change? Truly it came from just the fact that as a teenager I was a political junkie and I was really into following *CNN* and I was an early reader of *FiveThirtyEight*, which I regret in retrospect, considering, anyway, I'm not gonna get into that. But with climate change as a political issue, going back to the late 2010s, it was confusing to me why it was so divisive and political. I just thought, wow, this seems really straightforward. Greenhouse gas emissions are causing the world to get warmer. It's scientific fact. Why is this [00:05:00] something where one of the political parties is in favor of doing something about this and the other one is against it? I didn't really get it.

Meanwhile I was a journalism kid and I did journalism in high school and college, and I ended up putting those two things together, but I just really didn't understand with climate change. And it's gotten a lot worse since then, the divisiveness and the polarization, unfortunately. But it didn't make a lot of sense to me why it was that there were seemingly two very different stories that people were telling themselves about this phenomenon. You've definitely hit the nail on the head with that.

**Liv Slaby:** In your own words, what made you decide to take the leap from the *Los Angeles Times*?

**Sammy Roth:** A lot of different things, some of which have to do with changing media business models and the fact that a lot fewer people are consuming news through legacy newspapers. Some things are specific to the [00:06:00] *Los Angeles Times* and the trials and tribulations that have been happening there, which are probably less relevant for this conversation.

But I think the really big one, and the one that's related to what we're here to talk about, which is narrative and environmental storytelling, is that what my job was at the *Times* and what my job had been in journalism and in traditional news media for a long time was politics and policy. When I started at the *Desert Sun*, which Jon mentioned, and then going on at the *Los Angeles Times*, at first I was an energy reporter and then I was a climate columnist. But basically what I was doing was following the ins and outs of what were politicians up to, what were policy makers up to, what was happening in the energy industry. These daily, weekly, monthly, ups and downs of what was affecting where energy came from, how our policy was being set, what [00:07:00] was affecting elections.

I started to get really frustrated with that after a while because after doing that for 10 or 11 years. It wasn't that nothing had changed. Because definitely some things were changing for the better. Renewable energy had gotten a lot cheaper and was out-competing fossil fuels in a lot of cases, which was very good. The Inflation Reduction Act got passed in 2022. Biden's big climate bill, although obviously Trump and the Republicans in Congress then went and repealed significant parts of that. There was progress being made in a lot of areas, but in other ways it felt I was writing a lot of the same stories that I'd been writing when I got started, a lot of the same people were fighting about the same things. I said before, the polarization had just gotten a lot worse, in national politics and even in politics within California, a lot of the same environmental groups were fighting with each other about a lot of the same things, which solutions were better than which other solutions. On [00:08:00] the whole, the needle hadn't moved since when I had

started, people had gotten more deeply entrenched in the views that they had 10 years before, or 11 years before when I'd started as a journalist.

Not that I was quite so delusional as to think that I, as one journalist writing about this stuff, could change how everyone in the city of LA or in the state of California or in the country was going to understand energy policy or climate change. But I always told myself, as I think a lot of journalists or storytellers do, you're part of a whole here, and over time things will change significantly, the needle will move.

Climate change is a really time sensitive thing; we're talking about trying to reduce emissions by significant amounts by 2035, which is not that long from now. And if not by 2035, by 2040 or 2045, which is also not that long from now. I'd been doing this [00:09:00] for a decade and the policy and politics systems had, if anything, gotten worse in a lot of ways. So I'd been spending a lot of time thinking about why that was. Why wasn't the needle moving? What were the levers here that might be underlying policy and politics that I could spend time working on that might help lead to more sustainable, longer lasting change—that wouldn't just result in, finally the Democrats take back control and pass the Inflation Reduction Act and then three years later the Republicans come back into power and then undo all of that.

What I kept coming back to is that—and this is the storytelling angle—there was something really deeply wrong in the culture. Not an especially original thought, but it took me a while to get there. I'd been doing a bunch of stories on how climate was portrayed in Hollywood and in entertainment and the fact that there weren't that many movies or TV shows that [00:10:00] really said or did anything. They weren't that focused. Let me say that again. There weren't that many movies or TV shows that told stories about climate change or about clean energy.

I'd done a little bit of media criticism and read some media criticism that looked at how little the business that I was in—journalists—were writing about climate change. At times I was even occasionally frustrated with my own colleagues for writing stories that I thought should have been bringing up climate change but weren't. I had been doing some stories about fossil fuel advertising in sports and how the oil and gas industry was greenwashing itself through the Dodgers and other popular teams. I pretty quickly was able to get to the conclusion of, if we're going to over the longer term fix the policy and politics to the point where more sustainable change is possible, these deeper cultural levels of [00:11:00] how do people form their views and form their opinions about climate change, about clean energy, about agriculture, about transportation, these industries that tell stories that are outside of the political realm where people's views are so deeply entrenched and they reject opposing views because things are so polarized—something needs to change there in culture.

So I thought, what I really want to be writing about is deeper cultural change and how people form their views about climate change in those arenas. That was a very long answer to your question, but that's what got me to make this shift because that wasn't really what my job was at the *Los Angeles Times*. That wasn't the demand of me. I thought if I need to, if I'm gonna do that, I need to go do that on my own.

**Ursula Heise:** If I could follow up there. The emphasis on storytelling, I of course totally sympathize with as a professor of English. But I wonder, are you overestimating the power of stories to [00:12:00] change people's minds? Because there is a lot of storytelling in Hollywood about climate change. Remember the Scott Burns series *Extrapolations* that was fabulous on Apple TV+ a couple of years ago, but it didn't get a whole lot of press. Or *Don't Look Up*, so there are actually quite a few works out there,

but I'm not sure that they get all of the attention. I'm wondering, what makes you want to focus on storytelling, and what's your take on the impact of storytelling as opposed to just doing analysis of policy, politics, economics, which you also sometimes do in your articles?

**Sammy Roth:** To answer the question of, do I really think this will make a difference? I hope so. I don't know for sure. Nobody knows anything for sure. There have been some analyses done, looking statistically at [00:13:00] film and TV specifically, at how often climate change comes up. It's a very small percentage. *Extrapolations* was very well done. I watched that. There's *Don't Look Up*, which was Adam McKay's film about the comet that was going to hit Earth, which was a climate change metaphor. That was one of the ones that probably had the highest viewership of anything that was supposed to be a climate change story. You could go all the way back to *The Day After Tomorrow*, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

**Ursula Heise:** There are a lot of documentaries.

**Sammy Roth:** But when you look at a percentage, I don't have the numbers offhand here, but it's a low single-digit percentage, even when you include all the stuff that mentions climate change or renewable energy, or greenhouse gases or solar power. It's a really small number. Especially when you look qualitatively, there's a lot of room for growth for stories that don't just throw in those words, which is what the [00:14:00] studies have looked at, but actually tell substantive stories, which is the kind that you're talking about, *Extrapolations*. So that's one thing. I would also say that it's not just about making movies and TV shows. The way that I'm thinking about storytelling and culture, it's broader. It's advertising, it's theme parks, it's movies, it's a music, and it's—

**Ursula Heise:** Narrative across all different media and genres.

**Sammy Roth:** It is. Just to give another example, I mentioned advertising and sports. One of the storylines I've been really focused on over the last year and a half is the Dodgers. Because they're my favorite team. I'm a little bit biased towards that one.

**Ursula Heise:** Wanna say what the story is?

**Sammy Roth:** The story is that the biggest advertiser for the Dodgers for years and years now has been [00:15:00] 76 Gasoline, which is owned by a company Phillips 66, which operated until very recently a major oil refinery in the LA area down by the courts in Wilmington. The Wilmington and Carson Refinery. Phillips 66 is currently awaiting trial on accusations of violating the Clean Water Act at its refinery. It's just a major greenhouse gas polluter. A lot of oil companies advertise with sports teams and there are examples all over the country. There are baseball teams that have oil company patches on their jerseys. At a Sacramento Kings game, they wheeled out an Arco gasoline pump onto the floor at halftime and had people play a competition where you try to pump the perfect amount of [00:16:00] gasoline and you win a prize.

This stuff is pervasive. It's everywhere. It's at museums, it's at concert venues—that, to me, is storytelling. It's not just movies and TV shows, although that's an important part. You go to Disneyland, that's another story that I've worked on, and you ride Autopia, which is a ride that glorifies freeways and it wreaks hell because these are old polluting engines that run on gasoline even though it's in Tomorrowland. And it teaches kids who are driving these cars that the future is supposed to look like a freeway running on polluting cars. That was a success story for me because I wrote about that, and lo and behold, Disney

agreed that they would switch out the gas engines in the future and change them to electric vehicles. So this stuff is everywhere.

I think there are a lot of opportunities within culture to change narratives and shift stories that are currently [00:17:00] deleterious—to make them cleaner and more hopeful and selling a better message. Is that necessarily going to work and change everybody's minds about everything? No. I don't know that for sure, but I think there's a reason that companies spend billions—trillions, maybe—in advertising every year. It's pretty clear that in politics, people are quite prone—especially with things being so polarized today—to reject any message that doesn't conform to their priors. I think that it's quite important to find spaces that are outside of politics and unfortunately outside of even traditional news media—where you read something that you don't agree with and most of the time you're just gonna reject it to find a space that's more neutral or that feels less political—where you can tell stories and give messages that might seep into your consciousness in a different way. [00:18:00]

**Ursula Heise:** Forgive me if I'm going a little nerdy on you, but for you, is there a difference between narrative and just messaging? And, are there different audiences, and who do you think your audiences are and how do your audiences change with a switch from the *Los Angeles Times* to Substack?

**Sammy Roth:** The second question is easier than the first one. I don't know, is there a difference between narrative and messaging? I don't know how to answer that because I'm not sure what you mean by narrative and messaging.

**Ursula Heise:** There's messaging that you can do through just an argument. Whereas narrative is more about telling about a sequence of events with major characters.

**Jon Christensen:** I also think messaging is talking points, and a narrative is more of a story perhaps. I think in the way that people talk about this in politics—and I do want to get into politics a [00:19:00] little bit—but maybe first that question that Ursula had about how you're thinking about your audiences.

**Sammy Roth:** I'm still figuring out how I'm thinking about my audience. I was a little worried leaving the *Los Angeles Times* and switching from a politics and policy focus to the climate-culture nexus. Would people still be interested? Would people follow me over? I think so far the answer has been yes. You said you want to ask me about politics, I am still doing some of that. I didn't wanna leave it behind entirely. I think ultimately the goal with writing about climate and culture is to link it back to policy and politics and how the two interrelate. I'd like to think I can show how they're connected and not just have it be one or the other. So I'm thinking about it as a roughly similar audience. Maybe in some ways I can expand the audience. I'd like to think that there are people working in Hollywood or in video games or in themed [00:20:00] entertainment or in music or in sports or in whatever it may be, who perhaps had an interest in climate but didn't know that it could connect to their job, or who are looking for ways to incorporate it into their life, who might find this interesting.

**Jon Christensen:** Are there any great storytellers practicing today in the realm of climate?

**Sammy Roth:** Sure.

**Jon Christensen:** Who are some of them?

**Sammy Roth:** There are a lot of good novelists. There are good screenwriters.

**Ursula Heise:** Who are your favorites among the novelists? I'm curious.

**Sammy Roth:** That's a great question. This is the first person who comes to mind because I was just emailing with her, Claire Vaye Watkins.

**Ursula Heise:** Yeah.

**Sammy Roth:** She's great, she wrote *Gold Fame Citrus*, which is about water in the West, and it's a great novel, very depressing, semi-dystopian. She's [00:21:00] coming out with a book this summer about large-scale solar development in Nevada—a state that, Jon, I know you're very familiar with—and I'm looking forward to reading that. Frankly, I don't know that she and I quite will have the same views of the value of large-scale solar, but I'm looking forward to reading the book and asking her about it. She's very good at that.

There are a bunch of groups that were involved with some of the research that I was talking about earlier that do consulting in Hollywood on how to incorporate climate themes into film and TV. There's a consulting group called Good Energy that works on this. NRDC has an initiative called Rewrite the Future. There's a group out of London called Climate Spring. There are people who have really good expertise in this, who work with screenwriters and producers and directors to help them tell better climate stories. There are people who have made this their life's work and it's wonderful.

**Jon Christensen:** So to move into politics, you've been pretty critical [00:22:00] of Governor Gavin Newsom, and I wonder if you could tease out what part of that critique is about policy, what part is about politics, and what part is it about narrative?

**Sammy Roth:** That's a really interesting question. I would say it's probably a combination. Clearly Newsom has done a lot of good things on climate. If you go back to 2020, his big accomplishment was signing that executive order which was then turned into regulation by the Air Resources Board to phase out the sale of all gasoline vehicles in California by 2035. He said at the time something to the effect of, this is the most important thing we can do for climate change in California. He really heavily touted that one.

I'll use that as an example because it shows [00:23:00] how he's shifted. He really heavily defended that one for a while. But just a couple of months ago, as the electric vehicle market has shifted, where you've got car companies that are backing off of their EV goals as the Trump administration revoked the federal tax credit. At first when it looked like Trump and Congress were going to pull back the EV tax credits, Newsom said, if they do that, we're gonna backfill them in California. We're gonna pass our own EV tax credits. Then once the federal government did it, Newsom's response was basically, we don't really have the money. We can't do that. Then, when the Trump administration tried to revoke California's Clean Air Act waiver—this is a little wonky, but they revoked the Clean Air Act waiver that allows California to do that thing of no gas car sales—California sued and said, no, that's illegal, you can't do that.

Meanwhile, the head of the Air Resources Board, who until recently was Newsom's Climate [00:24:00] Advisor, who he appointed to lead the Air Resources Board, went out and said, this 2035 no gas car sales thing—we're open to negotiation on that. Maybe we won't necessarily hold firm to that. So now it's

seeming they might back off of that goal and negotiate with the auto industry on it as Newsom prepares to run for President. There have been a number of areas where, earlier in his governorship, he came out really strong on stuff and more recently has either wavered or backed off or shown more leniency.

He signed two bills to require large companies to disclose their carbon emissions, and to disclose their climate-related financial risks. But then he's been slowing the implementation of those bills and making it seemingly easier for companies to— [00:25:00] I don't remember the details offhand, but critics say he's just stymieing the implementation of those laws basically. Same thing with the single use plastics regulations. There's been a lot of criticism of him making it harder to implement those laws. Meanwhile Newsom keeps going on the storytelling aspect. He keeps going on about how California is leading the world on climate change. He went to Brazil, to the climate conference in November and made a big show out of that. I could list a bunch of other examples, which would probably be a waste of time for this podcast. But, I think that if he's going to paint California as a climate leader and probably campaign for President on California as a climate leader, while also saying, we're not so extreme on climate, we're also balancing climate with affordability—I guess I'm not sure what I think yet. I'm a little bit conflicted. [00:26:00]

**Jon Christensen:** You've also, I think, taken an issue with Matt Yglesias who's argued that Democrats should support fossil fuels in key states.

**Sammy Roth:** Yeah.

**Jon Christensen:** Where those industries are still important for the politics of it. And I'm wondering, if it's just a narrative, is it okay if it leads to winning? And then enabling more support for an energy transition and other good climate policies, which actually requires winning.

**Sammy Roth:** That's a very good question and something that I've been working through in my head and interviewing some climate scientists and political experts over the last few weeks. I'm hoping to write something on this.

**Jon Christensen:** Can you give us a little sneak preview?

**Sammy Roth:** I think part of what I'm struggling with is how it ultimately does lead to stronger climate action. The [00:27:00] thing that I agree with Yglesias about and that I assume Newsom is making a similar calculation about is that yeah, you do need more Democrats to get elected in order to have any hope on climate. And there is a narrative aspect to that. I think that a lot of the Democrats who were shying away from saying climate, even Tom Steyer now, by the way, who's been a really strong climate advocate throughout his career.

**Jon Christensen:** He was running for governor.

**Sammy Roth:** Very good to say that. He did a press conference two days ago on the anniversary of the LA wildfires starting where he was really hammering the big utility companies for being negligent, in his view, on wildfire risk, and how he's going to make it easier for people to generate their own solar power. He was making a lot of really strong points, but didn't say the words “climate change” once, which was fascinating. I think a lot of Democrats are making this calculation that talking about climate change is a losing issue. [00:28:00] Or at least not what voters want to hear and that, to the extent they talk about

renewable energy, it should just be a total affordability message. Then there are those like Yglesias who are going further and saying, no, you can't just talk about renewable energy. You've gotta go all of the above. Embrace oil and gas. That's how Democrats win in some of these swing states and even red states, and take back the Senate and take back the House. And if you wanna get anything done on climate, you've gotta present that Obama-era message, and not make climate your issue. You've gotta make all of the above energy your issue, and then you can eventually have strong climate action.

What I struggle with is two things. One, I think that's what Democrats did under Biden and they passed the IRA, the Inflation Reduction Act, and that was very [00:29:00] “all of the above.” There were a lot of subsidies for renewable energy, but they also gave Joe Manchin a bunch of good stuff for fossil fuels. And was it a big popular bill? No, nobody really knew anything about it. Partially that was a messaging failure by the Democrats, you could argue. But did it win a lot of love from swing state centrist to red voters? No, nobody really cared. And then the Republicans repealed it three years later, as soon as they got back to power. Even the Republicans from swing states and districts who supposedly were gonna love all the renewable energy jobs coming to their districts, and made noise they were never gonna vote to repeal this stuff because it was good for their districts, went and voted against it and nobody wanted to punish them for it. Their voters seemed fine.

Arguably Democrats could design stuff differently and do a better job but I think that's a strike against that argument—Democrats tried this once and from a climate perspective it was a big fail. But [00:30:00] the bigger issue I have from the messaging and narrative standpoint, or the bigger question I have, is: let's say Democrats follow Matt Yglesias's advice, and manage to adopt a united front on a pro oil and gas or “we're all of the above.” Solar and wind are great and cheap, but we also need to keep pumping oil and gas and embrace pipelines and liquified natural gas exports, whatever, and do all of this stuff, and everyone loves that and they get elected.

I guess I don't understand what happens in the long run. Because then you have a bunch of voters who have heard from Democrats that oil and gas are great and we need oil and gas. And you have a bunch of politicians who have gotten elected on that. What's the scenario where that then leads to those Democrats being able to get away with suddenly shifting and passing really aggressive climate action that then holds up politically [00:31:00] in the short or long run? They've just gotten elected on a really pro oil and gas platform. And all of the voters have been promised that. You need to get Democrats elected, but that leads to an outcome that's at best maybe the Inflation Reduction Act. Do you see what I'm getting at here? From a climate perspective, you get something that's weak at best and then probably just gets repealed by Republicans next time they take office anyway.

A lot of the people making this argument clearly don't take climate change as that serious a threat to begin with, because this political argument inevitably leads you to a place where you have a bunch of people in office who have promised to do something that's not that good for climate change and a bunch of voters who expect them to do something that's gonna be not good for climate change. There's no way where that leads to aggressive [00:32:00] action of the type that we need to keep emissions to sustainable levels. It just doesn't happen.

**Jon Christensen:** So it underlines your concern about the deeper cultural part of it.

**Sammy Roth:** I think it really does. Maybe it's a hard question because you need that longer term cultural awareness to change, where voters actually want politicians to promise more and to do more, and that's a harder problem to solve. But I also think that it's inherent for politicians to show leadership and to not just think their only job is to get elected, I better just meet the public where they're at. I don't disagree that there's a need for Democrats to get elected. Because we also have the problem of saving democracy and stopping authoritarianism and that's pretty real right now. But from the perspective of having a sustainable planet, if you just start promising, I'm going to boost oil drilling to record levels forever, that leads to a [00:33:00] pretty bad place.

**Liv Slaby:** Before I head out to teach, and as we are here today among the UCLA community, I did want to ask what you see as the responsibility of scholars and educators in terms of shaping climate narratives and ultimately contributing to the policy changes that we need to see?

**Jon Christensen:** Can I add to that and complexify it a little bit? Because I teach an environmental communications, environmental journalism, science communication, and new media course. And at the end of that course, last year, a really smart, engaged student stood up and said, I really believe in everything you've been teaching about empathy, understanding your audiences, narrative and storytelling and strategy, as well as [00:34:00] the practices of objectivity that enable us to share knowledge between journalists and scholars and researchers. He stood up and said, but what's the point? In this era that is so dominated by polarization and siloing of audiences and fake news and misinformation and lies. So I want to combine that with Liv's question, what do you think we should be doing here at the university with colleagues and students, in this era that is so fraught?

**Sammy Roth:** Jon, your question is harder, so I'm gonna answer your question.

**Ursula Heise:** Yeah. He wants you to solve his teaching problems.

**Sammy Roth:** Maybe this will [00:35:00] help in some way, but Liv, I think that the best thing I can say is that—and I think this is increasingly less of an issue, because things have just gotten so bad that people in academia are starting to do this anyway—but I would just say that to the extent that you can, with the research you're doing, and whatever projects you're working on, the more you can try to communicate, whether it's through journalists or on social media or through whatever public channels you have or just even in the research and in the writing itself, the more you can communicate publicly the applicability of your work to solving problems, the better.

I know there's sometimes an instinct that's instilled by institutions, for better or worse, to just do the scholarship or do the work and [00:36:00] then put it out into the world, and let others interpret it as they will or worry about what this means for issues of public policy or solving problems. There are just so many stupid people who are misinterpreting academia or misinterpreting research, or even more of the time just not taking it seriously at all or not bothering with it, and just feeding bad opinions and bad ideas to people who are actually in charge of stuff.

So I think the more that those of you who are actually studying problems seriously and doing the hard scholarship yourself, the more that you can, especially in this world where everyone has a platform and everyone can really make their voice heard, the more that you can take ownership of making the connection between “here's the work I am doing and here is why and how it is relevant to the real

world”—and not that universities aren't the real world, I don't mean to put forward that [00:37:00] attitude, this is very real—but the more that you can take your work and say, “here is what I think decision makers and companies and whoever should do with this and why,” that's just so valuable. The more of that, the better.

**Liv Slaby:** I completely agree with you about public-facing scholarship and the importance of not having conversations bounce around small groups of people, and rendering it legible and explaining why it is important, and connecting with journalists and other public-facing media through scholarship. I think that's extremely powerful.

**Sammy Roth:** And do something that I have not, which is start a TikTok and take it seriously. I really gotta get on that. I know it's probably bad advice in some ways, but everyone is there. I don't know.

**Liv Slaby:** TikTok is its own can of worms. I think Substack is pretty great.

**Sammy Roth:** Substack is good too. There's other platforms. There's Beehiiv and Ghost and Threads, and there's a million of them. But the more you can [00:38:00] pick a platform that works for you and if you can find ways to communicate your work there, that's always a good thing.

**Jon Christensen:** Part of that question from my student was also, in this era of polarization and siloing, misinformation and lies, practicing the dark arts of narrative, which we see a lot these days and we see it in climate change and in all kinds of other things—I think the part of the question he was asking is, should we consider using the dark arts of narrative too? Or should we, I think I hear you saying we should, stick to our practices of fact-based work, the practices of objectivity, of being able to trace your sources and being fair to different people.

**Sammy Roth:** What do you mean by the dark arts? [00:39:00]

**Jon Christensen:** We see it every day, fake narratives that are not based on the facts, on using dark empathy and preying on people's fears, not having sources that can be traced, not being fair to other people's arguments.

**Sammy Roth:** I don't think you should do fake news. Just to be clear, when we're talking about narrative, that's not what I've been talking about.

**Jon Christensen:** So I hear you. I think I'm coming to the same thing, it's that we need to get through this, there's no magical solution. Maybe we need to learn TikTok more. We really should be sticking to our practices [00:40:00] as journalists, as scholars, as researchers. It's what I think of as the practices of objectivity.

**Sammy Roth:** I think there are ways to bring stories and ideas and facts and issues to life to make them exciting, to make them accessible, that are different and new. Certainly when I'm thinking about narrative, both in the way that I use it and in some of the stuff that I write about, I'm not talking about lies or propaganda or misrepresentations. If someone makes a really good movie that gets someone interested in conflict over solar development or water rights, that's cool. If a company that [00:41:00] had a sustainable technology wanted to do an ad campaign in the way that fossil fuel companies always did it, I think that's neat. If UCLA—don't take this as a criticism because I don't necessarily know how you're marketing all

of your stuff—wanted to do a series of TikTok videos to promote cool new research you were doing, rather than put out a press release or a white paper, that could be cool. I don't think that's a dark art, and it can be fact-based, it can be grounded in reality. I think that's super different than Fox News or astroturfing or something.

I think there are ways to practice narrative that bring these ideas and stories to life for people and make them accessible in ways that are different than how we've done it in the past, and that are more likely to make people [00:42:00] actually care and take notice and maybe change their minds than writing a newspaper article might have, or doing an evening news broadcast might have in the 1990s or the 1950s.

**Ursula Heise:** Can I pick up on one aspect of something that's come up a couple of times? And then maybe we need to wrap up. I've noticed that in my teaching of environmental issues that you teach the environmental issues, but then increasingly I've also found myself needing to teach the different approaches from different stripes of environmentalists to the problem, and the increasing conflict over that. For example, conflict in the Mojave Desert over putting up large-scale solar versus protecting desert tortoise habitat. Or what mix of renewable energies and nuclear might be [00:43:00] the best way forward. Have you found yourself having to cover that more, or is that something you're interested in? These divisions? Not against the Trump administration, I think we all know what the deal is there.

**Sammy Roth:** Do you have another hour for podcast part two?

**Ursula Heise:** We can come back next week.

**Sammy Roth:** That's been one of the main things I've covered for my whole career, in part because they're just much more interesting—

**Ursula Heise:** It is really interesting.

**Sammy Roth:** Because there's only so much you can do writing about the Trump administration, I can't make any difference with them. Like I said earlier, part of my frustration was I thought if I wrote enough stories about tensions of solar development in the desert or environmental groups fighting over how rooftop solar should be subsidized, that I thought that maybe I'd make a difference because those were small enough and local enough. That maybe I'd [00:44:00] help find some resolution eventually.

Now after 10 or 11 years, it was the same people fighting about the same stuff. That was getting really annoying. They're important and hard conflicts. There are a lot of divisions between climate advocates about what the types of solutions are. Where should big solar farms go? How far can we get with rooftop solar? Is nuclear part of the portfolio or not? What is the role of wind? What do we do with food? Should we all stop eating meat or not? Is it electric vehicles, or redesigning our communities so we drive less?

Ultimately the very short version of the story that I've concluded after spending a lot of time on many of these is, the answer is almost always: climate change is impossible to solve with any one of these things. We need to do all of them and accept that there are inevitably [00:45:00] going to be trade-offs, and evaluating any one project or solution too narrowly is going to lead us to a lot of stasis and continued combustion of fossil fuels that are way worse than the side effects of any one of these solutions.

We should stop fighting so much and start moving more quickly. But people don't usually wanna hear that when they care a lot about the particular place that they're trying to protect, or the particular solution that is for whatever reason, sometimes a good reason, problematic to them. But yes, I've spent a lot of time on that.

**Jon Christensen:** Thank you, Sammy Roth, for joining us. We look forward to continuing to look at the world through climate colored goggles.

**Sammy Roth:** Thank you. And if I just may say before we cut off, if anyone is interested in reading my newsletter and subscribing, [climatecoloredgoggles.com](http://climatecoloredgoggles.com) is where you can get that. That is [climatecoloredgoggles.com](http://climatecoloredgoggles.com).

**Jon Christensen:** Thank you very much, and please subscribe, it's a great read. [00:46:00] Would you all join me in thanking Sammy Roth? [applause]

[outro]

**Liv Slaby:** This has been *Story+World: Changing Stories for a Changing Planet*, where we explore environmental art, activism, policy, and imagination in California and beyond. It's the podcast of the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies (LENS) at UCLA. Thank you for listening, and we hope you'll join us in our next story world.