A NEW CLIMATE FOR REALITY TV

PRODUCERS OF UNSCRIPTED TELEVISION ARE UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO DEPICT CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS AND SOLUTIONS WITHOUT SACRIFICING ENTERTAINMENT OR STORYTELLING. RESEARCH SHOWS THAT AUDIENCES WILL APPLAUD THE EFFORT.

WRITTEN BY
CYLE ZEZO

The Producers Guild has a long history of helping producers navigate ways to bring more sustainable practices into their productions. We invited Cyle Zezo, executive director of Reality of Change, to share how producers working in reality can explore new ways of connecting with audiences through incorporating sustainability into their projects.

Much of the entertainment world's sustainability work has traditionally focused on operational footprints—reducing transport, shifting to cleaner energy sources, reducing waste and moving away from single-use plastics. But audiences respond to a different urgent reality: Viewers overwhelmingly want to see the challenges and practical solutions related to environmental issues reflected authentically on screen.

Unscripted television is exceptionally well suited to meet this moment. Built around real people (or heightened versions of them) in the (often aspirational) real world, this sector has an unparalleled opportunity to meet audience demands by surfacing sustainable behaviors and innovations that people want to see, as well as the lived experiences and values that viewers already share. But these are too infrequently reflected or acknowledged in our unscripted entertainment.

Last November, my organization, Reality of Change, which supports sustainability efforts in the unscripted entertainment sector, and Rare, a global environmental nonprofit, rolled out the Greener Reality Pledge, an update to a pledge first announced at Realscreen in February. The Pledge was created and endorsed by an advisory committee of execs and producers from more than 30 unscripted studios and production companies, and serves as an acknowledgment of the important role of the unscripted sector in helping to realize a more sustainable world.

THE POTENTIAL OF REALITY

Over the past few decades, unscripted television has had a reciprocal, mutually reinforcing relationship with the wider culture. It has elevated unknown individuals to cultural icons, accelerated shifts in fashion, food, and design trends, and continues to engage in an ongoing dialogue with viewers about our culture's social values.

Parasocial relationships—the sense that you know and are invested in that person you see on screen—impact your views of what's status-elevating, important and even normal in your own life. It's similar to the effects of real-life relationships with friends and family.

But even a few minutes engaging with a show you've never seen before can activate existing beliefs about a topic and give you confidence in your intention and ability to positively alter your own behavior.

Research recently published by Rare and Reality of Change shows that viewers of a plant-based challenge in the food competition series *Recipe for Disaster* had more confidence in their ability to reduce meat consumption, a major emissions contributor. They also saw plant-based foods as healthier and more socially beneficial than the control group did, even though the benefits of plant-based eating were not discussed in the show. This suggests that people who already held these beliefs were activated by seeing plant-based foods presented in a positive light.

PRESENTING CLIMATE ORGANICALLY

Sustainability is by no means absent from the discourse on screen. In

Queer Eye's Fab Five show off their Kia EV-9.

fact, a 2024 USC Annenberg Media Impact Project report titled "Climate Unscripted: The Reality of Climate Change and Sustainable Solutions in Unscripted Television" found that 75 climate-related keywords were mentioned across broadcast and cable unscripted series more than 28,000 times in a six-month period.

Some of these were more overt than others, but given that they preceded widespread commitments like the Greener Reality Pledge, they also support some important notions.

One is that sustainability can show up naturally in unscripted entertainment because many of its subgenres specifically align with key sustainability areas. Tackling food waste and exploring ways to incorporate more plant-based eating make complete sense in a cooking series. Reducing energy costs and pursuing electrification are right at home in home-build and design shows. And, of course, there's travel, fashion, business, science, lifestyle and many other prominent unscripted topics rife with both environmental problems and solutions.

Another notion is that sustainability can be presented in organic, relevant ways that don't detract from entertainment value. This is demonstrated in the *Recipe for Disaster* research, echoing the results of research Rare has conducted examining, in part, the entertainment value of climate and sustainability on screen in scripted series *And Just Like That* and *Grey's Anatomy*. While *Extreme E - The Electric Odyssey* is a very sustainability-forward concept—showing high-performance electric SUVs in off-road racing action— *Paranormal Caught on Camera* cited sea-level change to explain upticks in Loch Ness Monster sightings, a less obvious but perfectly natural way in. In other examples, food shows can feature vegan options and composting without lecturing about their impacts on the planet.

Producers can be intentional about representing climate information and solutions without being didactic or shoehorning something in where it doesn't fit. This is great news, because doing so is exactly in line with what audiences tell us they want.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE SUPERMAJORITY

A supermajority of Americans, just like people all over the world, accept the reality of climate change—approximately 70%, according to the spring 2025 report by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication; a mere 15% don't. They also believe we have a responsibility to mitigate the consequences of climate change for future generations—74% according to This Is Planet Ed and Capita. And they overwhelmingly welcome the idea of climate solutions surfacing in the entertainment they watch—71% per research by Rare.

Despite the number of climate keyword mentions outlined in the USC study, though, it still feels generally quiet out there, as our entertainment has not caught up with viewer mindsets and preferences.

SO WHY SO QUIET?

Those viewer mindsets and preferences are clear but often misunderstood. A 2022 study in *Nature Communications* showed that 80% to 90% of Americans significantly underestimated prevailing levels of concern about climate change and support for mitigation policies. That indicates a pervasive misconception in our society that "other people" don't care about climate issues—a fatally incorrect assumption that is similarly expressed by execs and producers to potentially disastrous effect. This can show up as a network exec assuming audiences don't want to see sustainability in their shows (as demonstrated, they are wrong), and producers self-censoring for fear of rejection by the network.

In entertainment, omission can itself be a choice, and viewers can experience this as the culture around them not deeming it important, contributing to their own hesitation to talk about it.

Too often producers wait for a prompt or permission where it's not needed. If you're telling a great story where a sustainability topic or mention may be relevant and organic, why not approach it just like you would any other relevant theme in the show? Don't preemptively can it. If it doesn't work, edit it down later.

One could make the argument that absences of environmentally friendly messages on screen affect viewers just as much as the presence of such messages.

THE ABCS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Another reason for this is that the perception of what constitutes a "sustainability story" has often been too narrow. Of course a network is not going to respond favorably to a climate pitch if its image of these narratives is science and issues docs, while their bread and butter is dating and competition. Issue-focused documentaries are important and have clearly mobilized audiences to take action, but they are by no means the only way to represent sustainability on screen.

To clear things up, Reality of Change has a tip sheet that promotes broader thinking about sustainability: The ABCs of Climate Storytelling. Each letter represents a different level of attention trained on the environmental theme or actions.

Stories explicitly or implicitly about environmental issues are classified as A Stories. Think *Down to Earth with Zac Efron*, *The End Is Nye*, and even *OMG Fashun!* on E!, which orbited a consistent and overt sustainable raison d'être.

B Stories are differentiated as organic arcs, subplots, and things like challenges in a competition series that shine a

spotlight on relevant issues or solutions within otherwise nonenvironmental narratives. *Next Gen Chef*, for example, challenged its participants to incorporate common food waste into a baked dish. *Deadliest Catch* was confronted with climate change as a subplot since warming seas depleted crab populations and forced boats into more dangerous waters.

Lastly, casual integrations represent the smaller lifts, such as highlighting talent unplugging the EV before hitting the road, choosing the plant-based option at a restaurant, or mentioning the cost, efficiency and convenience benefits of a home upgrade in a reno show—an upgrade that also happens to be sustainable. In addition to typically being seamless, these seemingly small actions can punch above their weight and actively resonate with audiences.

WRITE IT IN

We know that sustainability can show up at multiple levels, but the ABCs of Climate Storytelling is just a framing device, not a how-to guide. To maximize a show's on-screen environmental potential, the creative production team can lay some groundwork, helping to create conditions for on-screen moments to surface naturally.

This can be as robust as fully writing and developing narrative bits like an eco-friendly date or a green challenge—for instance, a sustainable-design challenge in *Project Runway*.

It can also be as simple as thinking through where you're filming and what will be on screen. When planning set designs, producers can ensure there are functioning compost bins, for instance, or as in series like *The Great British Baking Show* and *Harry Potter: Wizards of Baking*, use induction stoves as the default in their kitchen sets.

When selecting a location, you may consider setting a scene (depending on the creative of the show) at a high-end plant-based restaurant or a date at a native plant nursery. Perhaps a season of a nature-set competition series could take place on rewilded land—anywhere that "sustainable place" can make its way into dialogue, behavior, and even visuals such as signage.

Brand partnerships can be a win all-around if approached with care. The Fab Five took to driving a Kia EV-9 in *Queer Eye*'s final season, and the British version of *Love Island* featured an eBay partnership promoting preloved fashion.

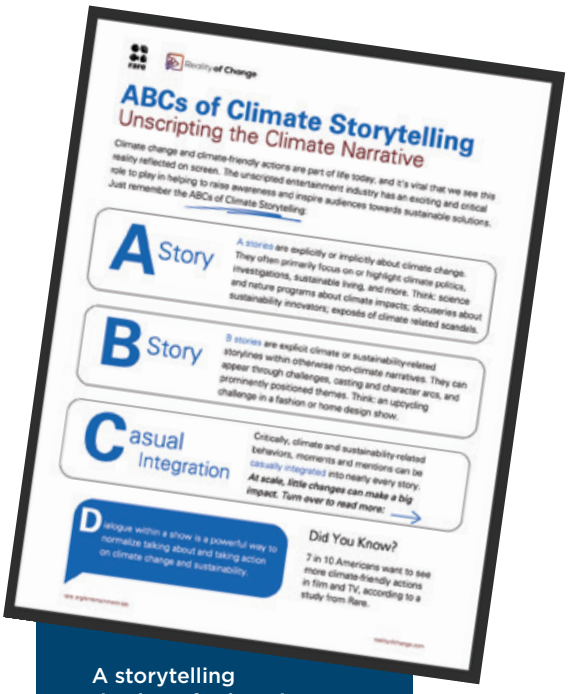
CLIMATE AS LIFESTYLE OR CAREER

Climate change is already wreaking havoc in the U.S. and around the world, with climate-fueled weather disasters traumatizing and displacing everyday Americans, while other Americans take to the front lines as heroes fighting to save them and their homes.

People continue to adopt sustainable lifestyles like minimal or zero waste, "buy it for life" shopping strategies, plant-based eating, and car-free living. Hobbies can be inherently sustainable, such as thrifting, repurposing used items, and organic and native gardening; or they can be impacted by a changing climate and collapsing ecosystems, like scuba diving and snorkeling, mountain climbing, hunting, and really any nature-based pastime.

Careers increasingly have sustainability connections, as well. These can be overt—*Love Is Blind* fan favorite Taylor Krause is a clean hydrogen expert, and it was charming to see her talk about it. They can also be indirect. Think sustainability-minded chefs, firefighters, farmers, and architects, to name a few, who can also sing, dance, race, and strategize—while having a great backstory to tell.

Given the level of concern shared by a supermajority of Americans, people with environmental connections, whether through careers, hobbies, lifestyles or experiences, are already


ABCs of Climate Storytelling
Unscripting the Climate Narrative
Climate change and climate-friendly actions are part of life today, and it's vital that we see this reality reflected on screen. The unscripted entertainment industry has an exciting and critical role to play in helping to raise awareness and inspire audiences towards sustainable solutions. Just remember the ABCs of Climate Storytelling:
A Story
A stories are explicitly or implicitly about climate change. They often primarily focus on or highlight climate politics, investigations, sustainable living, and more. Think: science and nature programs about climate impacts; docuseries about sustainability innovators; exposés of climate related scandals.
B Story
B stories are explicit climate or sustainability-related storylines within otherwise non-climate narratives. They can appear through challenges, casting and character arcs, and prominently positioned themes. Think: an upcycling challenge in a fashion or home design show.
Casual Integration
Critically, climate and sustainability-related behaviors, moments and mentions can be casually integrated into nearly every story. At scale, little changes can make a big impact. Turn over to read more:
Dialogue within a show is a powerful way to normalize talking about and taking action on climate change and sustainability.
Did You Know?
7 in 10 Americans want to see more climate-friendly actions in film and TV, according to a study from Rare.

A storytelling tip sheet for keeping climate in mind developed by Reality of Change.

appearing in nearly every unscripted series, whether or not those connections are made overtly clear.

However, the fact that everyday people care about and are already involved with sustainability will become evident when we offer them the opportunity to talk about it. That can be by way of a simple background package that tells us who they are, the recounting of an extraordinary experience that brings tears to our eyes and makes us want to cheer them on, or the simple decisions and voiced values that make them human.

Just like any other entertaining beat in a show, surfacing sustainability can add relevant substance, drama, and celebratory moments while, at the very least, maintaining the entertainment value—but often leveling it up in fresh, contemporary and exciting ways

AN ICE ROAD WITH NO ICE?

A simultaneous benefit and unfortunate fact is that reality TV producers have a true front-row seat to what's going

on in the world. Many work in the field in remote places embedded in real communities, working with or depicting the lives of real people. Some of us are seeing explicitly what happens when the effects of a changing world strike those places.

What happens when life doesn't go *Below Zero*? Or *Deadliest Catch* has to be reframed around a lack of anything to catch? What's the fate of *Ice Road Truckers* if there's no ice?

The fact of filming "in the real world" also means that the effects of these crises will force their way into our production and narrative realities.

Selling Sunset was filming in LA when the devastating fires swept through the region in January 2025, affecting production and altering the context of the show's narrative in real time. Similarly, the Canadian series *Todd Talbot's Passive House* was originally planned as a sustainability-focused home design show, but ultimately turned into a very different kind of climate story. Why? The zero-emissions house, whose progress the producers had been documenting, burned down in 2023 during Canada's worst wildfire season on record before the show finished filming.

These are direct climate impacts that are affecting the realities of the stories we're telling. Whether it's planned for or not, climate change is here, it's getting worse, and it's going to continue to rear its head in reality—and in turn, in reality TV.

TALKING THE TALK

In this time of rapid change, it's important that we "walk the walk" through our production carbon footprints, our individual professional engagement, and our company policies. But "talking the talk"—a unique entertainment industry specialty—may be the shift we truly need, a way to lift our societies over critical positive tipping points toward both resilience and a more solution-oriented way of thinking.

Making unscripted television that resonates requires extraordinary skill. It is, of course, never unplanned, but it also hardly ever goes according to plan.

Unscripted producers are adept at plotting out the conditions from which story unfolds, sometimes with significant structure and often with requisite open-ended flexibility. They act as guides during the production process, and then take everything that was filmed, complete with the twists and surprises, and mold it into entertainment that not only hits, but through which we can see ourselves—raw, diminished, glamorized, heightened, or dramatically distorted—in ways unlike in any other medium.

The same skills that gave us iconic shows that have reflected, instilled and responded to our cultural values have the potential now to be a key catalyst for cutting through our booming silences. We can celebrate modern-day heroes and future-conscious trendsetters, uncover and engage with solutions simple and complex, and help inspire a prosperous and regenerative future that will benefit everyone. ■

Cyle Zezo is the founder of Reality of Change and executive producer of Recipe for Disaster. *Zezo was previously head of alternative programming at The CW Network, where he was responsible for new series development, current series, and all network specials, and supported the digital team with original unscripted entertainment.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CW

The series *Recipe for Disaster* featured a plant-based challenge that viewers responded to positively.