“A Word After A Word After A Word is Power”

-Margaret Atwood, “Spelling”

Climate Politics and the Media Coverage of Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*

Thea Lewis

The Year of the Flood is a dystopic novel about the aftermath of a man-made pandemic, in a world in the midst of an environmental collapse.

The Year of the Flood is a cautionary tale focused on the lives of two strong women from the same community of religious environmentalists, in a world disturbingly like our own.

The Year of the Flood is yet another apocalyptic novel from Atwood, this time surrounding a cult of eco-freaks, the God’s Gardeners.

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INTRODUCTION

This project presents an exploration of the national conversation about climate change and its interaction with Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood,* as an important cultural work. The Canadian print media constructed narratives about the novel, and its political themes, throughout the year surrounding its release. Atwood in fact used the promotion of the book as a statement, performing the hymns she had written for the novel in churches across the country and using her tour to raise money for environmental organizations. This research examines the ways in which dominant stories were constructed in the media, and contributes to a broader conversation of the cultural politics of climate change, and the limits of the cultural imagination in regards to climate futures.

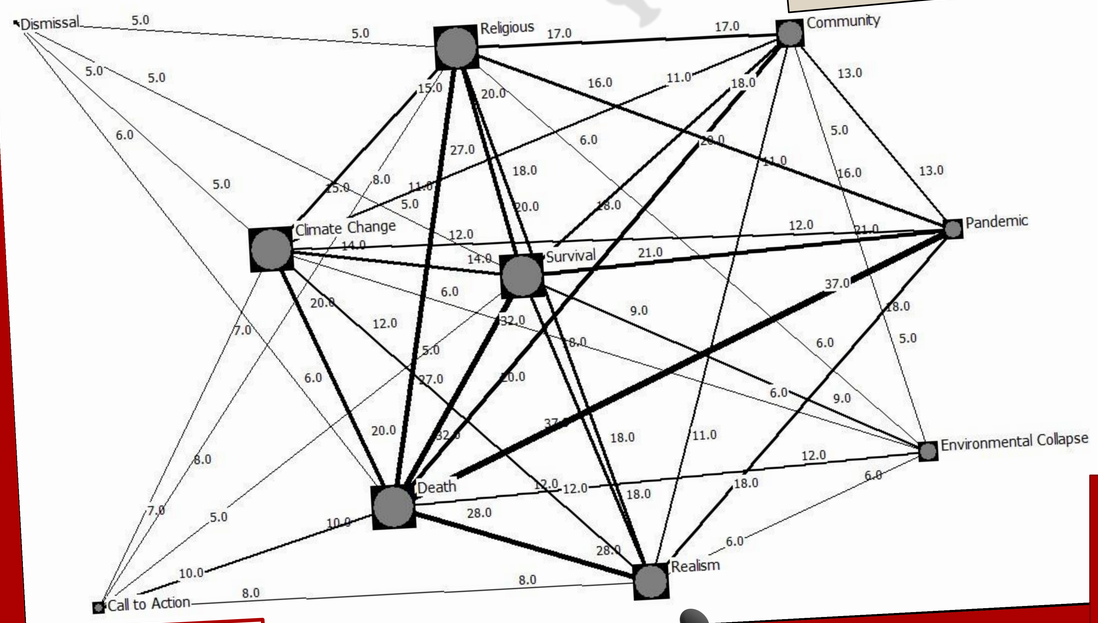
Methodology

This research followed a mixed-methods approach. It began with an exhaustive sweep of the Canadian print media coverage of “The Year of the Flood” and “Atwood,” pulled from the Factiva database, for the date range of 22/03/2009 – 22/03/2010 and yielding some 400 results. The majority of these were eliminated based on the criteria of being original (eliminating any duplications) and containing information about the content of the novel (eliminating simple mentions such as best seller lists).

After an initial analysis of the remaining 80 articles during which the codes emerged, they were coded for information about the production of the article and its content (see Codebook).

With the coded data sets, a Social Network Analysis was conducted using the Ucinet and Netdraw software. This software maps the relationships between the themes, connected by their mentions in articles, and visually represents the interconnected map of a thematic analysis of the media coverage of the novel. Each theme is represented as a node, labeled and defined in the codebook. The thickness of the lines connecting the themes is representative of the number of articles which contain both, which is visible in number form over the connecting tie. The size of the nodes varies based on the node degree, which represents the number of other nodes to which it is connected. Nodes connected to each other by mentions in common in only four articles or fewer have been eliminated from the visualization. The final analysis was supplemented by a qualitative examination of the articles.

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS



*Nodes moved slightly for clarity

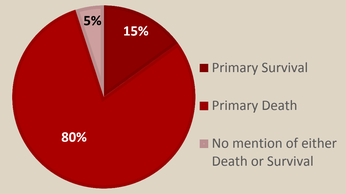
CODEBOOK

Node	Coded description and examples
Death	Description of the book as a story about death (e.g. dark, dystopic, post-pandemic, post-apocalyptic)
Survival	Description of the book as a story about survival (e.g. the two women who survived, a tale of the two survivors)
Climate Change	Description of the book as a story climate change or environmental issues (e.g. humanity’s relationship to nature, sustainable life style, environmental degradation of the world)
Pandemic	The event of the book that causes the mass death is described as a disease, a pandemic or a virus (e.g. post-pandemic world)
Environmental Collapse	The event of the book that causes the mass death is described as an environmental collapse, or an environmental catastrophe
Community	Description of the book includes mentions of community (e.g. the God’s Gardeners, grassroots)
Call to Action	Description of the book uses it as a message of social change (e.g. a cautionary tale, a warning cry, a tale of where we may be headed)
Dismissal	Description of the book dismisses it or its message (e.g. yet another dystopic, eco-freaks)
Religious	Description of the book includes religious themes (e.g. the Saints, religious cult, church performances)
Realism	Description of the book includes the realistic nature of the story (e.g. eerily possible, close future, mention of similarities to current world)

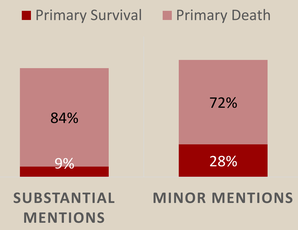
Descriptor	Explanation
Significance of Mention	Minor: Article includes a passing mention of the content of the novel (e.g. a single sentence description) Substantial: Article includes a more detailed description of the content of the novel (e.g. a paragraph, a full article)
Primary	Code is based on order of mention Primary Death: Description of the book where both Death and Survival codes are present, but where the Death code was mentioned first Primary Survival: Description of the book where both Death and Survival codes are present, but where the Survival code was mentioned first

RESULTS: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Death Vs Survival



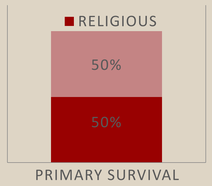
15% of the articles were coded primarily stories of survival whereas 80% were primarily stories of death. There was an overlap of 39% between the two codes, with 2 articles telling only a survival story, and with 42 articles (53% of the total) being coded only as Death.

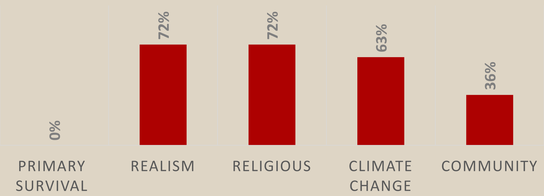


Only 9 % of the articles with a Minor mention of the book had Primary Survival stories, whereas 84% that had Primary Death stories. When the article had a Substantial mention, 28% had Primary Survival stories and 72% had Primary Death codes.

Call to Action

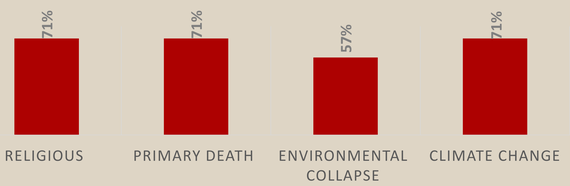
Call to Action articles make up 14% of the total number of articles examined. There are significant overlaps with Realism, Religion and Climate Change, where as Community only makes up 36% of the Call to Action articles and there are no Call to Action articles that are also coded for Primary Survival.





Religious

Religious articles make up 36% of all of the articles surveyed. 6 out of the 12 Primary Survival stories are also coded Religious. 62% of the Religious coded articles are also coded for Realism. 77% of the Community centered articles are coded Religious as well.

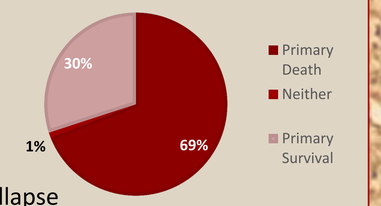


Dismissal

Dismissal articles only make up 9% of all of the articles. Primary Death, Climate Change and Religious codes each make up 71% of Dismissal articles, while a slight majority are also coded for Environmental Collapse.

Climate Change

Climate Change articles make up 29% of the of all the articles. 52% of the Climate Change articles were coded for Realism, and 65% are coded for Religious. 69% told a Death primary storyline where as 30% told a survival story, which makes up 50% of all the Primary survival articles.



Environmental Collapse

Environmental Collapse stories make up 15% of the total articles. 50% of the articles which identified the cause of the disaster as an Environmental Collapse, also were coded for Realism. Another 50% were coded for Religion. 41% of the Environmental Collapse stories were also coded for Community.

CONCLUSION

The statistics from the Descriptive Analytics in combination serve to paint small vignettes of the types of stories constructed by the media. Religion was used almost equally to sustain a call to action and to be a cause for dismissal, for example, meaning that the religious angle to the cultural imagining of climate change is a double edged sword. The lack of Primary Survival stories in the Call to Action articles, combined with the prevalence of the Realism code demonstrates that the Call to Action articles used fear to motivate change. The Environmental Collapse on the other hand, is in many ways a construction without basis in the novel, since the event that caused the widespread death was in fact a pandemic. The majority of the Dismissal articles implicated this code, however, indicating that they put extra effort into creating an environmental story to criticize. The dominant portrayal of the novel in the media is in fact a dark one, with the vast majority prioritizing the story of death over the story of survival. Through this we see a disjuncture between the optimism that Atwood herself describes and the available story lines in the media about climate politics.

The Network analysis shows simultaneously the centrality of the Climate Change, Realism and Religion themes and the marginalization of the Call to Action and the Dismissal stories. Despite Atwood’s efforts to situate the novel in a larger movement, the activist message of the book was not a focus of the media’s coverage of its release. The Dismissal articles are marginalized as quickly as the Call to Action articles are, however, which indicates the power of Atwood’s reputation and name: there were surprisingly few articles that criticized her message. Her name, and her voice, carry influence and power in the Canadian media landscape.

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