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Review: *The Black Thread* knits a compelling petroculture tale with a few dropped podcast stitches.

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Abstract

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The Black Thread is a four-part podcast miniseries about Norway's oil and gas paradox co-produced by Amy Westervelt's Drilled.media with NGOs KlimaKultur and The Norwegian Climate Foundation. The podcast explores the cultural role of oil in Norwegian society, examining how a country that values the environment and human rights can condone expanded oil and gas drilling at a time of 1.5 degree overshoot. While including a broad range of expert voices explaining how Norway views itself as a progressive climate leader while expanding its oil industry, it ultimately fails to make full use of the strengths of the podcast genre to challenge the country's well-oiled climate obstruction machine.

Keywords

Norway, oil, journalism, climate obstruction, disinformation

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Introduction

Dickon Bonvik-Stone, also the host of the podcast *Communicating Climate Change*, promises to pull at the threads of oil and gas intertwined in Norway's society in *The Black Thread*, a new podcast from the *Drilled* franchise. I was in Norway conducting research into political rhetoric around Equinor's proposed (1.3 billion barrel) Bay du Nord oil project when I first read about the podcast and couldn't believe my luck. As someone researching petrocultures and podcasting, *The Black Thread* is audio manna: four, on-topic, critical episodes to drill into as I commuted (on excellent public transit) to and from the Fridtjof Nansen Research Institute. Nansen was a Nobel-prize winning arctic explorer, an adventurer who embodied many of the Norwegian social values I learned about in the podcast. Walking to and from FNI's Polhøgda Villa, I listened intently hoping at the very least the pod would prepare me for coffee machine small talk and the daily lunchtime trivia quiz. I wasn't disappointed by the podcast, although it turns out nothing could've prepared me for a rapid-fire trivia in Norwegian with FNI researchers.

The first episode opens with strains of Grieg's *Peter and the Wolf* and tells listeners how Norwegians balance their eco-identity as outdoorsy, human rights champions with an ever-expanding offshore oil and gas industry. Podcast guest Kari Norgaard, author of *Living in Denial* (2011) speaks about the cultural concepts at the root of Norwegian society such as a willingness to volunteer for the collective good, referred to as 'dugnad,' and living the good life out of doors, 'friluftslive'. These concepts were new to me and helped me better understand my Norwegian research colleagues and will also contribute nuances to my political discourse research.

Bonvik-Stone explains how conformity and trust, not standing out, are key to Norwegian society. Note to self: no fist-pumping at trivia. However, these concepts of the collective good and a small population can also lead to the avoidance of difficult conversations about, for example, how can a society morally continue to drill oil as the world overshoots 1.5 degrees?¹ Despite their standing on the world stage as environmental progressives, Norway has no plans to stop drilling oil and gas. There are 78 proposed new wells, some in sensitive fishing areas in the Arctic and Barents Seas.²

One of the dropped stitches, referred to in the review's title, is the lack of regular Norwegian voices in the episodes. While there are many experts, journalists, and activists this results in too much telling listeners about Norwegian society and not enough showing. *The Black Thread* disregards another audio strength; the ability to transport listeners to other spaces via sound. When, for example, Norgaard talks about the cultural import of being outdoor savvy; knowing how to move your body

¹ <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2025>

² <https://www.norskepetroleum.no/en/developments-and-operations/recent-activity/>

across snow, I want to hear her shushing through the snow, breathless as she skis listeners into the Norwegian mountains, aka psyche, through the wonders of audio.

Podcasts as Climate Action Tools

Part of my research examines how the podcast medium, despite being hijacked recently by right-wing pundits,³ is an underused climate action tool. The medium's persuasive nature, agility, depth of parasocial bonding, and what Kate Lacey (2013) calls 'open spaces for intersubjectivity' allows listeners to consider what they're learning about climate change and gives them the space to consider what climate action they might take.

In the second half of the first episode, Silje Ask Lundberg, of the NGO Oil Change International, examines the clash between Norwegian identity and climate action by stating that while only 7% of the population was employed by the oil sector, there is fierce loyalty to Equinor. Although no longer fully state-owned (as it was when it was known as Statoil), it is still perceived as a company of the Norwegian people. Political and industry rhetoric has managed to twist Norwegian cultural ideals and the country's shared identity as good global citizens into a widely shared belief that Norwegian oil is also good for the world. This twisting of facts is a sweet spot for my research, and I was fascinated to learn how the oil industry uses Norwegian cultural tropes to create social licence for its extractive activities. For example, there are oil platforms named after Norwegian artists, including the composer Grieg and Aasta Hansteen, a feminist painter and writer. When I Googled Hansteen hoping to see her work, most images were of oil platforms and industrial infrastructure. One can only imagine what these artists would say about this if they were living. The industry has even manipulated a beloved Norwegian folk character Esben Askelad, a clever underdog who recognizes the hidden value in rubbish and saves the day. Words from the children's story have been used in petroleum reports. Nothing, it seems, is sacred.

The second episode, Petroganda, is a critique of Equinor's marketing and sponsorship campaign of cultural, youth and outdoor activities. Julie Forchhammer of KlimaKultur reveals that the company has spent approximately \$83 million USD over the last five years branding kids as young as five-years-old with their logo. She describes a computer game in one Equinor sponsored science centre where users play the role of energy minister. The idea is that the country needs more energy, you must find it while keeping tight control of the border lest migrants find their way in. The game's claim is that the world is in an energy crisis (not an environmental crisis). Another example described is how Stavanger's Petroleum Museum has a climbing gym designed to look like an oil rig. Once more, there's an absence of sound from

³ <https://www.mediamatters.org/google/right-leaning-online-shows-disproportionately-reach-variety-audiences-and-shape-political>

the playground or interviews with kids and parents to transport listeners into a deeper reflection on the Norwegian paradox.

Exposing Climate Obstruction

As in other seasons of *Drilled*, *The Black Thread* establishes over four episodes key climate obstruction narratives in Norway.

- Oil for energy security (Norwegian gas to replace Russian coal).
- It's a binary: we can either save the economy or the environment.
- Our oil is cleaner (not counting the emissions produced when it is burned).
- The fossil fuel Industry must be part of the climate solution.
- Oil companies are generous community benefactors.

In contrast to *Drilled: The Black Thread*, the eighth season of *Drilled: Light Sweet Crude* about the nascent oil industry in Guyana, exposes fossil fuel disinformation while also critiquing and transgressing normative journalism techniques such as objectivity and 'bothsideism.' This dual critique of the medium and the message, aims to inoculate listeners against climate obstruction messages. While not falling fully into 'bothsideism,' *The Black Thread*, is not quite as effective at unravelling pro-oil rhetoric, as it is not accompanied by a macro media critique. This is not just a matter of host style, but another example of the podcast not taking full advantage of the range of persuasive tools afforded by the medium. For example, in *Light Sweet Crude*, Amy Westervelt's wry inflections before and after any pro-oil industry discourse signals that she disagrees with the statements and that she trusts listeners to understand that she is sharing these views as a critique of false balance, aka 'bothsideism' a normative journalistic technique that Tim Snyder (2024) calls, "suicide for democracy."⁴

Norway's democracy benefits from a healthy fourth estate. A Reuters (2025) survey found, "a 54% level of trust in news and 42% of Norwegians access paid news. Norwegians are avid readers of news and this, coupled with an innovative media industry, a long-standing press subsidy scheme, and the absence of freesheets, helps explain the relative success of online news payment."⁵ The Reuters (2025) *News Influencers* report, however listed US podcasters Joe Rogan and Tucker Carlson as two of the most mentioned individuals or news influencers on Norwegian social media, along with the owner of X, Elon Musk. Overall, 39% of the top 100 individual 'news influencers' are creators from outside of Norway (mainly from the United States) and many are podcasters.⁶ The rise of right-wing podcasting

⁴ <https://www.ms.now/the-last-word/watch/both-sides-ism-is-suicide-for-democracy-because-of-trump-tim-snyder-says-208279621690>

⁵ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025/norway>

⁶ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news-creators-influencers/2025/norway>

in Norway is troubling when viewed through the lens of Shearer et al.'s (2023) findings that, "among those who hear news discussed on podcasts, a large majority (87%) say they expect it to be mostly accurate, compared with about one-in-ten who say they expect it to be mostly inaccurate. This is a much higher level of trust than people have in some other sources of news and information (p. 6)." *The Black Thread* includes calls from activists and Anna Karen Saether and Julie Forchhammer and journalist Ketan Joshi for Norwegian media to step up and critique the oil and gas industry and, while the podcast mentions cuts to the number of journalists on the oil and gas beat, there is an absence of interviews with working journalists from the country's larger newspapers or NRK to posit potential explanations.

Broken threads of connection between host and listeners

Thinking along with Swiatek's (2018) claim that podcasts bridge knowledge barriers through intimacy, another dropped stitch is the limited amount of times the host speaks directly to listeners. Although we learn that Bonvik-Stone is British, married to a Norwegian and likes picking Chanterelles, listeners may not feel the same sticky parasocial bond they might with Amy Westervelt, for example. While Bonvik-Stone sometimes breaks through the fourth wall, with scripted asides such as, "did you catch that?", the complexity of the content calls for more affect and many more instances. In Episode 3, the pro-oil discourse from Ann Cathrin Vaage, from the oil industry organization Offshore Norway contains so many twists, I had to stop, rewind and restart the pod several times. Vaage's claims, for example, that Norway must keep drilling oil because there's still consumer demand in the UK and the EU and that wind turbines on oil platforms, blue hydrogen, replacing coal, and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS - an expensive and largely untested technology,) can help the country reach its Paris Agreement goals, combined with Equinor's walk back of offshore wind, and how it all ties into fossil fuel lock-in merited separate sections. The discourse becomes so knotted here I craved asides from Bonvik-Stone (complete with Westervelt wryness) to debunk each element of what Boyer (2023) describes as 'petroknowledge': the 'original post-truth...the twisting of facts to serve the oil economy.'

This kind of debunking is key to the fight against climate obstruction. Kuthe et al. (2019) surveyed approximately 800 German and Austrian teenagers and found that more than climate change education, agency, i.e. an awareness of one's ability to generate change, was a more effective gauge of climate action. Ahmed and Cho (2019) studied 57,000 news podcast listeners in eight countries and found that they are likely to move beyond their individual experience of listening and to expand into the community, discussing with others what they heard online as well as undertaking acts of political participation. Their findings were true across all eight nations. Both

studies point to the importance of climate-themed podcasts using all the audio tools at their disposal to build empowered communities of listeners that can resist the industry's huge marketing budgets, 'petroknowledge' discourse and manipulation and use of social media that support what Kinder (2025) describes as a 'permanent' fossil fuel disinformation campaign.

There is much compelling content in *The Black Thread*, but its complexity needs more time 'to breath' and more effort to connect with listeners. The terrain is very rich however, and I hope the team considers making additional episodes to explore the relationship between Norway's faithful paid news subscribers, the supposed reluctance of legacy journalism to focus on the oil industry, and the growing influence of right-wing, anti-environmental news influencers and podcasters. Another potential episode could be a further exploration of Norwegian legends such as the Ragnorak as a potential narrative to drive climate action that was mentioned in passing but not expanded upon in the fourth and last episode. Another fascinating thread to follow is Kari Norgaard's suggestion, in the conclusion, of the formation of a climate 'dugnad' (see Haugestad & Norgaard, 2024) tying the Norwegian concept of collective identity through volunteering to climate action.

The Black Thread is hosted by Dickon Bovik-Stone and produced by *Drilled.media* with NGOs *KlimaKultur* and *The Norwegian Climate Foundation*. It's available at Drilled.media, communicatingclimatechange.com and via Spotify and Apple podcasts.

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