**CHAPTER FIVE: MASS MEDIA AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION**

* 1. ***Introduction***
	2. ***Organizational Routines and Constraints***
	3. ***Mass media and Environmental News Coverage***
		1. ***Brief history of environmental news coverage in mass media***
		2. ***Production of environmental news***

To a large extent, **media coverage of environmental issues** is constrained and shaped by thesame production constraints that govern news work in general. Earlier this chapter, we discussed some of the most significant of these: limited production periods; story lengths;and limited sources. Clarke (1992) has grouped these production constraints into two generalcategories: short-term logistical and technological constraints and long-term and occupational constraints that are embedded in the news process itself.

**Short-term pressures of time** have meant that environmental issues and problems have often been framed by journalists within an **event orientation**. As Dunwoody and Griffin (1993) point out, **this event orientation limits journalistic frames in two ways: it allows news sources to control the establishment of story frames, and it absolves journalists from attending to the bigger environmental picture**. For instance, in occurrences of environmental catastrophes such as tornadoes, hurricanes and blizzards, what is reported is injury, loss of life or the possibility of such. However, this **event-oriented reporting** is not limited to them, but also applied for **environmental hazards**: ozone depletion, acid rain and so on. Therefore, when these the later issues are reported as events in the news agenda, what is being ignored is the fact that **they are inevitable outcomes of a series of political and social decisions** (**please refer Allan Schnaiberg’s Treadmill of Production)**

While **event-centered coverage** has the advantage of **raising public awareness of otherwise ignored environmental topics**, it also has a negative side**. By focusing on discrete events rather than on the contexts in which they occur, the media tend to give news consumers the impression that individuals or errant corporations rather than institutional politics and social developments are responsible for these events.**

Another issue shaping the nature of environmental news coverage is that **the complexity of environmental issues** (i.e. they require **sophisticated reporting**).

* Environmental issues are so often difficult for non-specialists to understand. Meaning, news workers working on other journalistic beats cannot simply engage in reporting environmental stories.
* Few reporters themselves feel qualified to sort out the often conflicting scientific, technical and political claims involved in an environmental problem, they either avoid substantive issues altogether (Nelkin 1987) or turn to **informed sources** that can offer a credible and easily summarized précis of what is happening.

The final constraint on environmental reporting is the role and influence of news editors.

* Environmental news doesn’t fit easily in to the structure of routine news production. There are fixed bits in newspapers and broadcast news rooms such as sport, court trials, business etc. However, many of newspapers and broadcast news rooms lacked **environmental beat**. As a result editors and producers often do not know what to do with stories about the environment.
* The influence of editors: With one eye always fixed on **circulation or audience figures**, editors tend to favour stories that feature controversy and conflict (i.e. if it is a private newspaper in Ethiopia), or stories that feature the development of the government (public newspapers and broadcast news rooms). As a result, thoughtfulness often gives way to sensationalism. In addition, editors are more likely to be sensitive to external pressures from corporate advertisers and other powerful supporters of the status quo. Reporters know this, and on occasion modify or deliberately overlook significant stories that involve environmental wrongdoing (Friedman 1983).

The other one is about **long-term constraints on environmental journalism**. Longer-term constraints on environmental journalism relate to historically evolved journalistic priorities, notably the requirements for news **‘balance’ and ‘objectivity’**. News workers today still view objectivity and balance as the cornerstones of their profession. For environmental reporting, objectivity and balance mean that reporters often attempt to distance themselves and their readers from the environmentalist struggle to effect a shift in public consciousness, taking refuge instead in the objectivism of science. Journalists thus see themselves as a neutral and ironic voice, willing to be won over only if the scientific evidence concerning acid rain, global warming, biotechnology, etc. is sufficiently powerful and unambiguous. The major shortcoming of this approach is that few environmental reporters are sufficiently well informed to be able effectively to evaluate the ‘scientific standing’. The ideal of objectivity also means that journalists rarely express the content of environmental stories in overtly political terms, opting instead for news frames that emphasize conservation, civic responsibility and green consumerism [[1]](#footnote-1)reducing politically charged stories such as global warming.

***5.4. Constructing ‘Winning’ Environmental Accounts in the Media***

As Stallings (1990) has noted, some media accounts of environmental problems drop by the wayside while other ‘winning accounts’ persist and ultimately succeed in gaining acceptance. Indeed, the media contribute to this by fostering an image of either growth or decay for a particular problem. Claims-makers thus need to learn how to keep environmental stories fresh and compelling.

In recording the ascent and tenure of environmental problems on the media agenda, it is possible to identify four key factors. First, in order to gain prominence, a potential problem must be cast in terms **which ‘resonate’ with existing and widely held cultural concepts**. This is why the **frame alignment** process is so crucial. Despite over three decades of exposure to environmental discourse, the actual awareness and salience of most environmental issues remains ‘pitifully low’. In particular, most citizens, especially in North America, continue to place their faith in science and technology and to believe that economic growth is generally desirable. Thus, packaging an issue in the form of direct criticism of the Dominant Social Paradigm would not appear to be an effective communication strategy for environmental claims-makers. Instead, it makes more sense to situate environmental messages in frames that have wider recognition and support in the target population: health and safety, bureaucratic bungling, good citizenship, and so on.

Second, a potential environmental problem must be **articulated through the agendas of established ‘authority fora’, notably politics and science.** If it does not receive this legitimacy, a problem will likely stagnate outside the media arena. This was the case in Britain where various ‘green’ issues (acid rain, ozone damage) lay relatively fallow until invigorated by a speech from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to the Royal Society in September 1988, in which she adopted an environmental rhetoric for the first time. The Thatcher speech conferred a new degree of **political legitimacy** on the environment and the environmental movement and this subsequently diffused throughout many other arenas with the assistance of the mass media.

Third, an **environmental problem must be able to be related to the present rather than the distant future in order to capture media attention**. That is, our environmental claim shouldn’t be a faraway problem. Dianne Dumanoski, an environmental reporter for the *Boston Globe*, notes that some of the more **immediate environmental problems** such as oil spill interest editors more. Global warming appeared to be a far away problem until the abnormally hot summer of 1988 when a series of tangible environmental disasters – droughts, floods, forest fires, polluted beaches – dominated the news. These contributed significantly to *Time* magazine’s editorial decision to feature the endangered earth in its Planet of the Year issue of 2 January 1989.

Finally, **an environmental problem should have an ‘action agenda’ attached to it either at international level (global conventions, treaties, programmes) or local community level (tree-planting, recycling).** Environmental conditions that are less amenable to action are not as likely to appeal to reporters and editors unless, as was the case with the Ethiopian famine, a moral panic can be created around the consequences provoking a flurry of humanitarian relief efforts. Furthermore, **rather than advocating some long-term action plan with results which may not be noticed for decades**, environmental **claims-makers should be able to offer the media some tangible results in the here and now**: for example, shutting down an incinerator, cleaning up a polluted harbour, rescuing a beached whale.

**Conclusion**

What should be evident from the discussion in this chapter is the considerable extent to which environmental news is socially constructed. In large measure, this is a reflection of the rhythms and constraints inherent in the practice of journalism itself. In addition, it reflects the multiple competing claims that news workers must routinely sort out in the course of putting together a story. Despite all the constraints, the environment has progressed from a topic with no distinct identity of its own to the point where it is now i.e. an established part of everyday journalism (though it hasn’t moved to that status in countries like Ethiopia).

**CHAPTER SIX**

**SCIENCE, SCIENTISTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEM**

**6.1 Science and environmental policy-making**

In order for **a scientific issue to become policy it must be translated into something that is ‘treatable’**. As a result, **at the policy formulation stage** the contribution of natural scientistsusually diminishes while the role of socioeconomic and technical experts grows. For example,Liberatore (1992) found that while natural science findings still played an importantrole in the international debate on global warming in the early 1990s, it was the input ofeconomists, policy analysts and energy technology experts that was crucial in shaping thenature of the European Community response.

**6.2**. **Scientific roles in environmental problem-solving**

Susskind (1994) has proposed **five primary ‘roles’ which are played by scientific advisers** in the environmental policy-making process: ***trend spotters, theory builders, theory testers, science communicators and applied policy analysts***. These roles frequently overlap but each has its own tasks and agendas.

***Trend spotters***are scientists who are the first to detect changes in ecological patterns and to understand their significance correctly. Occasionally, the trend spotter may be a lone scientist who observes some important pattern in the micro-ecology of the pond or marsh and is able to extrapolate this onto the larger environmental canvas. More common, however, are trend spotters who are part of a scientific team that is engaged in gathering and analyzing longitudinal data such as that assembled from the LANDSAT satellite or from the European Air Chemistry Network.

***Theory builders***try to **explain the causes for the changes that the trend spotters identify**. They are inclined to engage in model building, both to fit explanations to past circumstances and to predict future effects.

***Theory testers***critically scrutinize the models suggested by theory builders. Using pilot tests or controlled experiments, they attempt to ascertain whether the hypotheses and propositions generated by the model can be empirically proven.

***Science communicators***attempt to **translate the difficult-to-decipher data into terms that the public at large can understand**. They are key players in the ‘coming out’ process that was discussed in an earlier section of this chapter. Some communicators such as Edward Wilson are eminent scientists who feel a strong moral responsibility to bring the fruits of their research to the public. Others, for example, the Canadian geneticist and broadcaster David Suzuki, are researchers who have made a conscious decision to spend their life **popularizing science and carrying the ecological message to a wider audience**.

***Applied policy analysts***act as **consultants to political decision-makers**, **converting scientific findings into policy recommendations.** They play a prominent role in the formulation of environmental treaties because they take what is often abstract scientific information and recast it in terms that are amenable to legislation or to international agreements.

Each of the five types of scientists may contribute throughout the **environmental problem-solving process** but there is a considerable degree of specialization; that is, trend spotters and theory testers are usually more prominent during the fact-finding stages while science communicators and policy analysts play key roles during the negotiation/bargaining period (Susskind 1994: 77). In terms of the three key tasks in constructing environmental problems discussed in Chapter 4, trend spotters and theory testers can be said to characterize the ‘assembling’ process, communicators in ‘presenting’ an issue and applied policy analysts in ‘contesting’ an environmental claim.

1. The buying of products that are not harmful to the environment [↑](#footnote-ref-1)