

Environmental Media

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The use of media to communicate about the environment has become a large and complex field of study, attracting many excellent scholars. This is neither a literature review nor an introduction of seminal articles or media producers, but rather an overview of some of the different questions that arise in the study and production of environmental media. Just as the choice of lens influences the images captured by a camera, the selection of a model for analysis shapes the understanding we have of multifaceted topics like this. Laswell's (1960) classic essay includes some dated and objectionable references; nevertheless, his communication model remains a useful tool for examining some of the primary variables of interest. Laswell suggests that a communication act can be described as:

Who
Says What
In Which Channel
To Whom
With What Effect (p. 117)

These variables all affect each other, and some important influences – such as cultural, political, and economic systems – penetrate all of them.

Who. Laswell describes this aspect of communication research as control analysis. From this perspective, we consider the originators of environmental media messages. 19th and early 20th century efforts to communicate about the environment were frequently initiated by individuals. Writers and artists like Charles Darwin, Ted Banfield, John Audubon, and John Muir – usually white men – inspired readers to imagine distant lands and animals. In the decades since then, individual communicators remain influential, as they have become more diverse and explored new channels like blogs and podcasts. In the mid to late 20th century, complex productions, requiring entire teams, began attracting the limelight. In some cases – e.g., *Princess Mononoke* or *Wall-E* – most of the audience knows little about the originators of the production, while in others, such as *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* or *Cosmos*, attention is fixed on a host.

The analysis of the professional practices of environmental journalists is another important component of this lens on environmental media. We can learn more about the quality of environmental news when we examine the training of environmental journalists; the nature of the environmental beat; the influence of the concepts of objectivity and balance; journalists' reliance on industry, government, and scientific sources; and the influence of different pressure groups (Corbett, 2006; Hansen, 2011; Wyss, 2008).

Control analysis also leads to discussions about the political, social, and economic barriers that limit the voices we hear on the media. In many parts of the world, commercial interests and the need to attract the largest possible audience drive the media. Production and distribution costs may be very high, which also restricts access. Many of the world's pressing environmental issues are most extreme in impoverished communities, but

environmental media messages often originate in privileged sectors of society, although this is slowly changing.

Says What. Content studies attempt to reveal information about the kinds of environmental messages we see in the media. Though analyses of nonfiction media dominate environmental content studies, an increasing number consider portrayals of entertainment programming as well. Content studies often analyze the themes and narratives most frequently associated with environmental media, such as the prevalence of stories that emphasize economic factors (e.g., Gilding *et al.*, 2012), consumerism (e.g., Howard-Williams, 2011), charismatic “flagship” species (e.g., Clucas, McHugh, & Caro, 2008), conflict (e.g., Meissner, 2012), and fear (e.g., O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Studies about “greenwashing” focus on the way advertisers use environmental themes to promote consumerism and their products (e.g., Corbett, 2006; Spack, Board, Crighton, Kostika, & Ivory, 2012). Framing studies consider the roles, relationships, and foci of environmental topics in the media. One notable finding of framing research is that the media continually present humans as separate from the environment, rather than a part of it (Lakoff, 2010; Ugglå & Olausson, 2013).

In Which Channel. The channel itself also impacts the message. Print lends itself well to the communication of complex ideas, because people can easily go through the material at their own pace or go back over pieces they have forgotten or missed. This may be very important for complicated environmental stories. The conversational nature of radio lends itself well to building a relationship between the listener and the audience, but it also favors people with strong voices and conventional accents. The visual power of television and film enhances both credibility and the emotional potency of a topic. It also promotes topics and people that are visually attractive.

Video games, the Internet, and social media channels have all added new opportunities for environmental communication, but they have also introduced obstacles. On the one hand, the barriers to entry for some of these channels are lower. It does not take much skill or money to start a blog about an environmental problem. It is more difficult, however, to attract an audience to actually follow it. As the sheer number of media messages grows exponentially, audiences are overwhelmed by information overload and harder to reach.

To Whom. This variable is an important consideration for marketers and advertisers, who use detailed information about their audiences to tailor more compelling media messages. This is why the advertisements you see on many social media sites have an uncanny way of matching your interests. From the perspective of the environmental communicator, one of the fundamental challenges in the design of media messages is the adaptation of the message for a specific target audience. A program that is very effective for one audience may be a flop with another. Some people might be moved by the plight of marine mammals choking on plastic, while others would be more affected by the impact that plastic could be having on the safety of the seafood they feed their children. Some people might be fascinated by a technical discussion about how increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere influence the acidity of the ocean, but it could overwhelm or bore many others.

With What Effect? This is the variable that interests most people. We want to know if media messages influence audiences. If they do, we want to know which factors contribute to the effect. Unfortunately, these questions are also very difficult to answer. As a result, there are conflicting views about it.

One view is that media use is fundamentally bad for the environment. Some critics (e.g., Louv, 2006; Mander, 1992) argue that the mere use of electronic media technology disrupts our relationship with the environment by changing the way we view the world. Other critics focus on types of media content that may lead to undesirable environmental attitudes. Television's emphasis on consumerism, dramatic visuals, fast pace, and loss of context are common complaints (e.g., McKibben, 1992). Another concern is that the production of electronic media devices involves the use of "conflict minerals" and exposes workers to toxic substances. In addition, many users replace their electronic devices frequently and discard their old ones. Because all electronic devices contain toxic materials, if this "e-waste" is not recycled properly, it can be very hazardous. Frequently, the materials are shipped to poorer countries, where they often pollute the air and water.

Despite these problems, countless examples demonstrate that the media may educate people about environmental issues and initiate significant behavior changes. For example, Francis & Hewlitt (2007) describe the way the media helped shift public perceptions about orcas from detestable killers that should be slain on sight to charismatic, social animals worthy of passionate protection. Activists ranging from Aldo Leopold and Jane Goodall to Vandana Shiva and David Suzuki have used the media to teach people about issues they would not otherwise experience and galvanize them to change their behaviors.

This essay has necessarily excluded many outstanding examples of environmental media and research. For more information, you can start with the journal *Environmental Communication* as well as the recommended further reading, blogs and websites on the Routledge Sustainability Hub.

References and further reading

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