

# Environmental Journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Emerging Field

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## Abstract

*The environmental theme, driven by the engagement of social movements and by specific policies around the world, has been gaining strength in the academic space. Little by little journalism also adopts the "environment" as an agenda, even if it is through events such as natural disasters and catastrophes, when not due to "cold agendas" that address curiosities of fauna and flora. Considering journalism as a discourse and as a form of knowledge about the world, this article, with an essay disjointed profile, reflects on the possibilities of building "Environmental Journalism."*

## Introduction

Journalism is seen as a form of knowledge, that is., there is a production of knowledge, which is distinguished for being transient and ephemeral, but still essential to companies. This perspective, suggested originally by Park (2008) from a functionalist matrix, is exploited by Genro Filho (1989), who points out the singularity as the category in which the knowledge coming from journalism crystallizes, in opposition to the universal one, which would be of interest to science and its way of perceiving the world. In a similar way, Meditsch (1992, 1994) points to the specificity of the knowledge produced by journalism, which - on the basis of professional values that guide and the actual conditions of production - produces differentiated forms of narratives, which allows even aspects of a given fact or context to be revealed that other forms of knowledge ignore. Consequently, a prospect of a knowing/doing subject to misunderstanding and aware of the transitoriness of the certainties it produces, because journalism is always situated knowledge.

Environmental Journalism is, first of all, Journalism. How we understand Journalism, then, impacts the constitution of this concept: Environmental Journalism does not cease to be a knowing about the world, nor a product and practice permeated by different discourses, which hinder alliances and conflicts. However, it is observed that there are few studies on this topic, reflecting what the concept of Environmental Journalism are

mobilizing: between 1987 and 2010, only 11 dissertations and theses defended in Brazil, in a universe of 101, have this concern (Girardi, Loose, and Camana, 2015). Thus, the very definition of Environmental Journalism is a construction to come and in dispute. In order to synthesize this issue, a distinction has been suggested between what they call "Journalism of/about the Environment" and Environmental Journalism (Girardi *et al.*, 2013; Girardi, Loose, and Camana, 2015): while the first lies in the field of conventional journalism, having the characteristic of only thematic clipping, that is, it discusses "environmental" guidelines, the second should go beyond mere specialization by subject. For these authors,

*Environmental journalism, starting from a specific theme, aims to be transforming, mobilizing, and a promoter of debate by means of qualified information and in favor of full sustainability. For its implementation, it is necessary to seek support in more comprehensive views, allowing to see the connections, overcome the reiterated fragmentation. In this way, the nature of the specialized journalism merges with the socio-environmental demands that ultimately compose the horizon of reflection of emerging paradigms. (Girardi, Schwaab, Massierer, and Loose, 2012, p. 148).*

### 1. On the Possible Environments

If the unrest of the discussions on the environment was mainly in the 1970s, the initial discussions about the *environment category* in the Social Sciences from this period are also tributary. The American sociologists Catton and Dunlap (1978, p. 44) were the first to ventilate the need for incorporation of ecological issues in research objects that were not necessarily environmental: "This involves studying the effects of the environment on society (e.g., resource abundance or scarcity on stratification) and the effects of society on the environmental (e.g., the contributions of differing economic systems to environmental degradation)".

Thus, when they see that the work of the sociological time departed from anthropocentric assumptions, the authors above have been involved in the delineation of two major axes for the Social Sciences, defined from the position occupied by the *Environment* category in analysis: the HEP (*Human Exemptionality Paradigm*) and the NEP (*New Ecological Paradigm*). The HEP represents a continuity of the already exercised sociology, because it captures humanity from the specificity of its cultural characteristics that, in some way, are superior to the biological ones. The second model, in accordance with Fleury, Almeida, and Prenebida (2014), sees humanity as just another species sharing the planet. There is, in the NEP, then, a prerogative hypertension, because it points to an idea of dependence among the human beings. Catton and Dunlap (1978), as well as a large part of the theoretical tradition that they inspired, suggest, *roughly*, treating the environmental problems

as *real* problems. From this perspective, a cause and effect relationship is assumed between human activity on the planet and the degradation of nature, which would be the scene of the current global “environmental crisis” scenario.

This is, in this conception the environmental problems exist and should be apprehended since their materiality: although they have been caused by a given society, the perception of social actors involved to some extent in that specific situation (or the meanings they attribute to the environment) is not configured as a matter for these authors. Even though it may seem paradoxical, for this theoretical realistic tradition, the overcoming of this crisis conjuncture would also be given by human intervention in nature: by assuming an objective and clear reality of environmental issues, the authors focus identification and reaction abilities in the expert systems, that is, it is almost solely up to Science to solve the problems produced. The realistic approach of Catton and Dunlap (1978), although innovative in its meaning of environmental issues, was not concerned with breaking with the dichotomy that exists between society and nature. Moreover, even if it has designed a dialog between these poles until then unknown, realism, to some extent, reinforces the idea of nature and society in ontologically distinct places: even though one may act on the other, there is no room in this, theoretical perspective to develop contact zones.

Journalism in general, it is argued here, is quite linked to this way of apprehending the world: its news-values, in fact, are characterized by what is *real*, by the *event*. In other words, we can say that journalism is interested in narrating what it sees, even if this point of view is always partial and incomplete. In this sense, Environmental Journalism emerges based on covering environmental disasters or catastrophes, as is the case of landslides or extreme events (death of species, tsunamis etc.). In these cases, journalism - from a strictly realistic view - recounts the fact itself, giving priority to official sources and scientists, in search of explanations and predictions of the future. With this, the lack of more contextualized and systematic coverage of less local - or, alternatively, less *concrete* - issues is justified, as is the case of global environmental changes or techno scientific controversies (such as the case of genetically modified organisms, for example).

It is interesting to observe the participation of journalism in the construction of environmental issues, a perspective which, to a certain extent, dialogs with the idea that the journalistic doing simultaneously recounts

and produces it worldwide. From a constructionist approach, it would be up to Environmental Journalism to recognize that events taken as environmental are not isolated events, but part of an extensive network of relationships and meanings. This is an event like the death of fish, for example, it would be necessary for journalism to investigate the multiple causes, listening to different subjects and institutions without regarding them as more or less authorized to say. This involves the broadening of the variety of sources used: in the example given, it would be necessary to listen to scientific and official sources (such as government agencies), as well as the fishermen in the region, surrounding residents, industries, and environmental activists, in short, all those who think they have (and often do have) something to say about the situation.

## 2. The "environment" as an issue

Although environmental problems have always occurred, it is at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that they become a distinguished object of interest: from the 1960s, the planet seems to have acquired a sort of "ecological sensitivity." In more general political terms, an *environmental issue* has arisen, in which the *environment* is (re)defined by *societies* in more ways than one. It is in the context of effervescence that various social spheres have included the ecological dimension in its patterns, weaving relationships especially between the growth of nations and the already scarce "natural resources." The publication best known to throw light on the subject dates from 1972: the Meadows report (*The limits to growth*). The document, which is sponsored by the Club of Rome, brings the findings of a study conducted by researchers at the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT), which sought to estimate the time necessary for the depletion of "resources" on the planet if the growth trends of production and consumption remained the same (Porto-Gonçalves, 2012). In that same year, the United Nations convened the conference in Stockholm, Sweden, the first major international meeting in which the debate focused on the issue of the environment – even though this was always evoked in its relationship with development or growth. Also in 1972, in the wake of the discussions in Stockholm, the UN created the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), an entity which launched the Brundtland report in 1983, also known as "Our common future": it is in this document that the concept of "sustainable development" becomes popular (Redclift, 2002), from the questioning of the unequal ways of life in different nations and criticizing consumption beyond the bearable for ecosystems.

### 3. Environmental activist PR (public relations)

Early innovators in activist news management of environmental issues such as Greenpeace were able to bypass routine biases towards better funded official PR sources because, amongst other factors, of their understanding of journalistic 'news values' such as conflict (Lowe and Morrison 1984) and the need for strong audio and visual content in their promotional materials (Anderson 2002: 9-10). Anderson identifies a growth in the number and influence of single-issue environmental pressure groups in the UK since the 1960s which have focused on matters such as nuclear power, genetically modified crops, road building, and climate change. She outlines a number of factors in their relative media management successes including: the mobilization of (tactical and financial) resources; targeting communications effectively; and paying particular attention to issue cycles and policy changes in order to mount interventions aimed at influencing key decisions (Anderson 2003: 120-21).

The tactics used by Greenpeace in the 1990s and 2000s offer a good example to explore the implications of some of these issues. The organization, in many ways, operates more like a large corporation than an activist group. It has offices across the world that employ people with backgrounds in journalism and PR, as well as impressive resources for the production, editing, and distribution of media content (Anderson 2003: 122). It has employed these resources most effectively in gaining media coverage of spectacular, visually-arresting acts of protest designed to 'generate public outcry' and to 'force [issues] onto the public agenda' (123). Success at generating news coverage for attention-grabbing stunts and direct action was made more likely by the concomitant ability of such pressure groups to understand a range of different factors. For instance, they need to know what news organizations want and when (e.g. in terms of visually-arresting publicity materials, offering sources willing to go on record and act as spokespeople at the right time, etc). It also helps if they are able to frame manufactured news events in relation to pre-existing policy and news cycles (Hansen 2010: 55-6).

Despite winning continued and often high-profile media coverage for the issues on which they campaign, better-resourced NGOs and grassroots activists alike have often had trouble gaining coverage for their own 'frames' or definitions of issues (Hansen 2010: 56). While they are often very good at getting contentious

issues on the news agenda, numerous studies have shown that their influence does not routinely extend to commanding a 'prominent role' in continued debates (57). In addition to this, the success of normally marginal campaigning voices is often counterbalanced by a redoubling of communications efforts from richer and more powerful corporate or political players (Hansen 2011; Wallack et al 1999). The limited efficacy of such spectacular episodic activist media management has been a factor in many campaigners' wish to eschew media-oriented activism entirely. Echoing social scientists' concerns that publicly-funded science PR may damage the public legitimacy of science, some have argued that the need for media attention can have detrimental impacts on social movements themselves (Gitlin 1980). Indeed, a common theme in research about political and environmental protest suggests the more spectacular the protest, the more likely it is that protestors will be covered in a delegitimizing way (Rosie and Gorringer 2009).

## Conclusion

It is possible to practice journalism that addresses environmental issues from different premises: *roughly speaking*, it is feasible to point out the problems (Realism), listen to multiple actors (Social Constructionism), unravel the techno scientific risks (Structure and Society of Risks) and pay attention to their notion of separation between environmental processes and social (Post-constructionism). Each one of these perspectives leads to different "environments," which leads to various solutions, narratives, and protagonists. That is, as many Environmental Journalisms as there are understandings of Environment can be assumed: what seems to be in question is to specify where the starting point is when addressing this issue. The practices commonly used by conventional journalism suggest a strong relationship with the realistic prospect of environmental issues: the "environment," in this context, is almost synonymous with "nature," which explains specific coverage on individual issues - and here, issues are read as *problems*. This justifies the current catastrophic journalism, which assumes to be an agent of modernity by distancing societies and nature, highlighting the *impacts* of the first on the second, as if nature was something given and inert or reactive. On the other hand, some journalism that is positioned as "counter-hegemonic" suggests the need to "give voice" the various types of knowledge, seeking the different possible representations when of an environmental event. We must, therefore, question whether these approaches are sufficiently adequate to follow in course or, in other words,

whether they have already exhausted their potential to offer several reading frames on the world. In this sense, and highlighting that the theoretical syntheses presented here *are not steps* of a research program or thought, we suggest that journalism - in particular its environmental aims - realizes and assumes the emergence of new narratives, which go beyond concrete and closed issues, but that are also more than representations about the world: what needs to be faced, perhaps, is the radical possibility that other worlds are possible.

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