

Claims-makers and media frames of environmental issues

by

Poornananda Dsegowdanakoplu

Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Mangalore University, Mangalore
574199 India

For a problem to enter into the arena of public discourse or become part of the political process media coverage is crucial. The mass media have been attributed a major role as a forum for public debate in general, where 'various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality' (Guruvitch and Levy, 1985, p-19). It is the mass media, which are often held up as the cause for the higher awareness of environmental issues (Mazur, 1985). They have played an important role in many discrete problems into a major public issue (Hannigan, 1995).

Schoenfeld et al. (1979) have shown that it was the 'issue entrepreneurs' who initially brought media attention to environmental problems. The news media were not sure how seriously to treat the growing number of claims (Keating and Gallon, 1997,) even as they were trying to grasp the basic substance of environmental issues. As initially conceptualised by Spector and Kituse (1977) claims were complaints about social conditions which members of a group perceived to be offensive and undesirable. To make a claim it is necessary to engage in a variety of specific activities: naming the problem, distinguishing it from other similar or more encompassing problems, determining the scientific, technical, moral or legal basis of the claim, and gauging who is responsible for taking ameliorative action. The media provide a series of arenas in which symbolic contests are carried out among competing sponsors of meaning (Scheufele, 1999; Cox, 2006). The issues central to this symbolic contest are: who gains access to media representation and what overall themes emerge in the media treatment of an issue. While those who gain media representation are called claims-makers the themes that emerge in media representation of an issue are called frames (Trumbo, 1996). Media frame, a concept adapted by several media researchers (Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978; Entman & Rojecki, 1993) from Erving Goffman's (1974) work on small group interaction, is a news angle used as an organizing device that helps both the journalist and the public make sense of issues and events and thereby inject them with meaning. They furnish an answer to the question 'what is it that's going on here?' (Benford, 1993: 678). Gamson and Modiglianin (1987) found media frame as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (p. 143). The frame suggests what the controversy is about presenting the essence of the issue. Touchman (1978) Viewed media or news frames as necessary to turn meaningless and nonrecognizable happenings into a discernible event. Media frames also serve as working routines for journalists that allow the journalists to 'quickly identify and classify information and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences' (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7).

Claims-makers try to promote their favoured frames to journalists whereas at the same time mediapersons forge their own frames largely for reasons of ideology, efficiency and story suitability. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) depict the interaction between claims-makers and the media as a subtle 'content over meaning' in which activists attempt to

'sell' their preferred images, arguments and story lines to journalists who, more often than not, prefer to maintain and reproduce the dominant mainstream frames. In presenting environmental claims, issue entrepreneurs have to command attention and legitimize their claim.

The Indian media that rejected the claims of environmental groups as a Western fad irrelevant to India in the 1970s began paying attention to their claims by the 1980s (Guha, 1993). It was found that the 'environment' frame was inconsistent with the media perception of 'development' (Krishna, 1996). Several environmental organizations and civil society groups in India have been making claims and influencing media frames of environmental problems. This study will examine how claims-makers are treated and how the mainstream media frame key environmental issues. It will also analyze whether the treatment of claims-makers and media frames change through time. A content analysis of four national daily newspapers will be made along with a case study of coverage of one environmental issue. The study will be of immense use in understanding the association between claims-making by environmental and civil society groups and framing of the environmental issues in media.

References

- Benford, R.D. (1993). Frame disputes within the nuclear disarmament movement. *Social Forces*, 71(3), 677-701
- Cottle, S. (1993). Mediating the environment. In A. Hansen (Ed.), *The mass media and environmental issues* (pp. 134-149). London: Leicester University Press.
- Cox, R. (2006). *Environmental communication and the public sphere*. Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Dunwoody, S. & Griffin, R. J. (1993). Journalistic strategies for reporting long-term environmental issues: A case study of three superfund sites. In A. Hansen (Ed.), *The mass media and environmental issues* (pp. 22-50). London: Leicester University Press.
- Entman, R. M. & Rojecki, A. (1993), Freezing out the public: Elite and media framing of the U.S. anti-nuclear movement. *Political Communication*, 10, 155-173.
- Gamson, W., Modigliani, A. (1987). The changing course of affirmative action. In R.G. Braungart & M.M. Braungart (Eds), *Research in Political Sociology*, 3, 137-177. Greenwich, CT: Jai Press.
- Gamson, W.A. and Wolfsfeld, G. (1993). Movement and media as interacting systems, *Annals (AAPSS)*, 528, 114-25.
- Gitlin, T. (1980). *The whole world is watching*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: an Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.

Gurevitch, M., and Levy, M. R., 1985, *Mass Communication Review Yearbook*, Vol. 5. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Guha, R. (1992). Coming of age. *Critique*, 1 (5), 23-24.

Krishna, S. (1996). *Environmental politics*. New Delhi. Sage.

Mazur, A. (1985). The mass media in environmental controversies. In A. Brannegan & S. Golderberg (Eds.), *Social response to technological change* (pp. 135-151). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Murthy, M.N. (2006). Environmental issues in television news channels. *Society, Culture and Technology*, 15 (2), 25-37.

Scheufele, D.A. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication*, 49 (1), 103-122.

Spector, M., and Kitsuse, J. (1977) *Constructing Social Problems*. Menlo Park, CA: Cummings.

Tuchman, G. (1978). Introduction: the symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media. In G. Tuchman, A.K. Daniels and J. Bennet (eds), *Hearth and Home*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tuchman, G. (1978) *Making News: a Study in the Construction of Reality*. New York: Free Press.

Trumbo, C. (1996). Constructing climate change: claims and frames in US news coverage of an environmental issue. *Public Understanding of Science*, 5, 269–283.