Media, communication and environmental change

Anders Hansen

Much, maybe most, of what we learn and know about ‘the environment’, we know from the media, broadly defined. Indeed, this applies not only to our beliefs and knowledge about those aspects of the environment, which are regarded as problems or issues for public and political concern, but extends much deeper to the ways in which we – as individuals, cultures and societies – view, perceive and value nature and the natural environment.

What particularly distinguishes the history of the recent half century is the crucial role played by mass media and communication defining ‘the environment’ as a concept and domain, and in bringing environmental issues and problems to public and political attention. Thus, since the emergence and rise of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s, the mass media have been a central public arena for publicising environmental issues and for contesting claims, arguments and opinions about our use and abuse of the environment.

Indeed, a defining feature of many of the most well known and most politically effective environmental pressure groups continues to be their view of the mass media as integral and essential to their campaigning strategy.

Where in earlier eras much political decision-making with regard to the environment may have been based largely on expert and scientific evidence, with a keen eye on economic development and ‘progress’, such decision-making has increasingly been influenced and governed by how environmental and related issues are presented to and perceived by the public. Communicating about the environment may have been seen in the not so distant past as mainly a matter of making the public understand the science behind controversial environmental issues.

However, some of the most controversial environmental issues and debates of the recent period show a very different picture. Whether looking at the ozone layer, species extinction, climate change, whaling, animal experimentation or the multiple issues relating to rapid advances in the bio-genetic sciences, it is clear that the battles over these issues are now as much to do with ‘winning hearts and minds’ as they are to do with science-based evidence.

Communication then is a central aspect of how we come to know, and to know about, the environment and environmental issues, and the major media are a central public arena through which we become aware of environmental issues and the way in which they are addressed, contested and resolved. Indeed, the centrality of ‘communication’ to the rise of ‘the environment’ as a core social and political issue since the 1960s is reflected in the increasing prominence and consolidation enjoyed by ‘environmental communication’ studies as a distinctive strand within media and communication studies generally.

Environmental communication research: consolidation and diversification

This development has been underway since the 1970s, but it is perhaps particularly the 1990s and the most recent decade that have seen a maturing and embedding of environmental communication research within national and international communication associations and within university-level courses and curricula. Sustaining this trend and its consolidation is the growing body of book-length publications on environmental communication (e.g. Allan et al, 2000; Cox, 2006; Corbett, 2006; Hansen, in press 2009) and the rapid growth in journal articles across a range of science/environment/health and communications journals, including the establishment of academic journals specifically focused on environmental

The International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) has had a Working Group on Environmental Issues, Science and Risk Communication since 1988. Within the last decade this group has enjoyed a significant growth, with particularly large attendances at its meetings at the IAMCR annual conferences in Paris, 2007, and Stockholm, 2008.

The establishment of a similar section/panel within the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) in 2008 and the growing prominence of comparable panels in American communication associations (e.g. the National Communication Association, NCA, and the online Environmental Communication Network: http://www.esf.edu/ecn/) are further testimony to the growing importance of environmental communication as a significant field and focus within media and communication research.

While media and communication research focused on the environment and environmental issues/problems has thus become firmly established as a distinctive field over the last two decades, it has also evolved and diversified in a number of important ways. Studies of environmental communication have thus evolved from a relatively narrow focus on ‘environmental issues’ to be part of the growth in studies across the much broader spectrum of media and communications issues regarding science, medicine/health, environment and risk (Hansen, 2008).

Secondly, the field has seen important developments away from traditional narrow concerns with mainstream news coverage of environmental issues – often perceived in simple journalistic terms of balance and bias – and its influence on public opinion toward drawing on a much richer body of theories and approaches to help understand and elucidate the broader social, political and cultural roles of environmental communication.

Producing environmental communication: sources, journalists, media

We now have a significant body of research on the communication and publicity practices of sources of environmental messages as well as about environmental journalism and journalists. Unlike the closely related area of science communication research, studies of environmental journalism moved away relatively early on from traditional concerns with ‘accuracy’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘bias/distortion’ in media reporting towards a more constructivist perspective on how news and other media coverage of the environment is driven by complex processes of claims-making, organisational arrangements, economic imperatives and cultural values (Schoenfeld et al, 1979; Hansen, 1993).

Much of the source-oriented research has focused on environmental pressure groups, showing, amongst other things, that while pressure groups may often be adept at gaining a great deal of media coverage, they have generally been less successful in framing media definitions of environmental issues or in securing public legitimacy and support for their definitions. There is also a considerable body of research showing that the traditional ‘authority-orientation’ of the news media works against environmental pressure groups, who are less likely than government sources, independent ‘experts’ and scientists, and even in some instances corporate and business spokespersons to be quoted in media reporting on environmental issues.

Research on the news management, publicity and campaigning practices of environmental pressure groups has increasingly, if somewhat belatedly, been complemented by comparable research on how large corporations/companies, scientific institutions, government departments and political parties seek to actively manage and influence communication about the environment and associated controversial issues (Beder, 2002; Davis, 2007).
While Friedman (2004: 176) describes the 1990s as the decade that environmental journalism ‘grew into its shoes’, she also notes the ever increasing pressures on environmental journalists caught between a shrinking news hole/increased media competition and ‘a growing need to tell longer, complicated and more in-depth stories’. Lewis et al (2008) in a study of British journalists similarly note how a range of factors – e.g. the rapid advances of new communications technologies, shrinking news hole, economic pressures on news organisations, publicity practices of powerful sources - combine to shift the balance of power between media professionals and their sources increasingly in the direction of the latter.

There is thus mounting evidence (see also Trench, 2008) that economic and organisational pressures have led to journalism – environmental and other – that is increasingly desk-bound. This in turn has increased the scope for pro-active news sources and news-providers to ‘subsidise’ the work of news organisations and their journalists with ready-packaged and carefully framed ‘information’, while at the same time depriving journalists of some of their most traditional networking and source-checking strategies based around ‘face-to-face’ interviews or contacts with sources.

**Covering the environment: studies of media representations**

Easily the most prolific focus of media and communications research has been and continues to be that of news coverage of environmental issues and controversies. Analyses of news coverage have encompassed a broad range of individual and distinct types of environmental issues, but key areas attracting a more sustained research focus have been: pollution/contamination-disasters (broadly defined and including particularly oil-and-chemical related pollution disasters); nuclear power (although both media and research interest in nuclear issues have been muted since the early 1990s); and – since the late 1980s – global warming and climate change.

While ‘news’ continues to be the main focus of environmental communication research, an important and much needed body of research on other types of media and genres has begun to emerge, e.g. on the uses and representations of nature, the environment and environmentalism in film (Ingram, 2000), documentary (Bousé, 2000), advertising and entertainment television (Meister and Japp, 2002).

These are important developments because they help in showing, inter alia, that the successes or failures of particular claims, frames and messages about environmental issues in the news media have to be understood against the background of the kind of messages, images and ideologies about the environment that dominate in the wider cultural and symbolic environment.

Research on media coverage of environmental issues has contributed considerably to our understanding of why some environmental issues are successfully constructed as issues for public concern, while others – seemingly equally serious or important – quickly vanish from the media agenda and from public view. Of particular interest here is perhaps the seemingly cyclical nature of environmental coverage and public environmental concern in what Downs (1972) presciently referred to as ‘the issue-attention cycle’.

While media and communication research on environmental issues has comprised a wide and diverse range of environmental problems, the most prolific area of research in the recent period has been that of ‘climate change’ (e.g. Moser & Dilling, 2007). This is not entirely surprising, as the ‘climate debate’ itself has increasingly assumed the position of a ‘master-discourse’, i.e. an ‘umbrella’ concept subsuming a whole variety of hitherto relatively disparate, separate and distinct discussions and issues. The potential downside to the increasing concentration of media coverage and public debate around climate change, is that a whole range of environmental issues which can not in some form or other be easily linked to the by now well-rehearsed public
discourse on climate change disappear from public view, and consequently fall by the wayside also in terms of public or political action.

One of the most interesting and productive developments in approaches to media coverage of environmental issues has been the increasing application of the concept of ‘framing’, i.e. the principles of ‘selection’ and ‘salience’ (Entman, 1993) in media content which help structure audience responses by directing attention to: what the issue/problem is; who/what is responsible; and what the solution is (Ryan, 1991). Drawing on the frame/package categories developed by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) in their analysis of nuclear issues and popular culture, studies of media and environmental issues have demonstrated how key interpretative packages (‘progress’, ‘economic prospect’, ‘ethical’, ‘Pandora’s box’, ‘runaway’, ‘nature/nurture’, ‘public accountability’ and ‘globalisation’) are strategically deployed and manipulated by key sources in public environmental debate, with significant implications for both the nature of media coverage and the mobilisation of public understanding of controversial issues such as climate change (see Nisbet, 2009, for a particularly lucid account).

Social and political implications of environmental communication

Ultimately, the assumption, whether explicit or implicit, behind most research into media representations of environmental issues is that these play a role in shaping and influencing public understanding/opinion and political decision-making in society. Like research on the production and content of media representations of environmental issues, studies of the wider social implications of such coverage have been characterised by increasing sophistication and appreciation of the highly complex ways in which environmental messages, images and beliefs circulate in society.

Studies have noted interesting parallels between the ups-and-downs of media coverage of the environment and comparable trends in public concern – as measured through public opinion surveys – about the environment. However, mapping the relationship between media coverage and public concern has proved rather more of a challenge.

Agenda-setting studies have confirmed that the media can play a potentially powerful role in setting the agenda for public concern about and awareness of environmental issues (Soroka, 2002). Media agenda-setting is most pronounced in relation to ‘unobtrusive’ issues, where direct personal experience or access to non-media sources of information is limited. With the ‘quantity of coverage’ thesis, and building on the agenda-setting model, Mazur (1990) and others (see Gutteling, 2005, for a review) have similarly shown that increased media coverage of controversy leads to increased public opposition and perception of risk.

Cultivation analyses, comparing the environmental beliefs of ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ television viewers, have also yielded interesting insights. The relative absence of the ‘environment’ in television entertainment content thus leads to ‘cultivation in reverse’, i.e. viewers who watch a great deal of television entertainment tend to be less concerned about the environment, while those who focus on news and documentaries in their television consumption tend to have higher levels of environmental awareness and concern (Besley and Shanahan, 2004).

While studies of media coverage and public opinion have amply demonstrated the difficulties and complexities of mapping their interaction, there is little doubt that the media serve as an important public reservoir of readily available images, meanings and definitions about the environment. The media are an important public arena (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988), where different images and definitions – ‘sponsored’ by different agents, groups and interested parties – compete and struggle with each other.

Environmental meanings, messages and definitions communicated in any one single medium, format or genre are unlikely to exert a simple linear influence on public
beliefs, understanding or behaviour; but the media, in their broad and diverse totality, provide an important cultural context from which various publics draw both vocabularies and frames of understanding for making sense of the environment generally, and of claims about environmental problems more specifically.

Conclusion

Environmental communication research has come a long way in the last few decades, on the one hand consolidating itself as a distinctive subfield of media and communication research, while at the same time healthily diversifying in terms of theoretical frameworks, analytical approaches and types of media and communications processes examined.

The main achievement is perhaps the considerable advances in the last two decades towards an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the complex processes involved in the social ‘construction’ of the environment as an issue for public concern. We now know a great deal – although of course much remains to be done – about the news management, publicity and campaigning practices of environmental claims-makers, about environmental journalists and environmental journalism, about the organisational and economic pressures impinging on media organisations and their handling of the environment, and about the social, political and cultural implications of communication about the environment.

The change experienced in the last couple of decades in how communication research approaches and analyses of ‘environment, media and communication’ can also be indicated by the changing vocabulary: from the lexis of ‘media effects’, ‘accuracy’, ‘bias’, ‘balance’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘causality’ to a vocabulary which points to the dynamic, fluid and multidirectional nature of social communication processes with terms like construction, interaction, reinforcement, engagement, information loops, resonance, circulation of claims and parallel forums of meaning creation.

References


Anders Hansen is Deputy Director of the Centre for Mass Communication Research and Lecturer in Mass Communications in the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Leicester, UK. He is Chair of the Environment, Science and Risk Communication Group under the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR). He edited one of the first book-length collections on media and the environment: *The Mass Media and Environmental Issues* (Leicester University Press, 1993) and is author of *Environment, Media and Communication* (Routledge, 2009). Further book publications include the recently published 4-volume set *Mass Communication Research Methods* (Sage, 2009), and, as lead author, *Mass Communication Research Methods* (Macmillan, 1998) and *Media, Research, Methods* (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010). He is also currently serving on the Editorial Board of *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*. 