

Public Disengagement from Environmental Issues in Relation to Their Media Coverage

Desinteresse público das questões ambientais em relação à cobertura dos media

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Abstract: The environmental crisis and climate change belong to a group of topics that appear not to be receiving as much media attention as some other issues, e.g. politics, economy, finance, and social and ethnic issues. Too often sidelined, even if environment gets some scope in news and documentaries, it is not always presented comprehensively enough. Although environmentalists and eco-philosophers are constantly – and ever more urgently – pointing to what they describe as an alarming situation at hand, it seems that most of the public has adopted a rather indifferent (disengaged) posture towards news about an imminent environmental crisis, climate change, global warming, the use of plastic etc. Public discourse and media discourse have been increasingly intertwined, so ordinary people acquire most information (not only) on environmental issues from the mass media: press, internet, radio and TV, particularly from newscast and documentaries. This paper will discuss possible relations between presentation of environmental issues in the media and attitudes held by their audience. We believe that the media must assume their part in creating public awareness of environmental issues. Our paper will be based on interdisciplinary, predominantly theoretical research involving the combination of media studies and media philosophy. We will discuss main features of this issue from the viewpoint of media-centric theories, since we maintain that effects of the mass media on empirical and social reality (including environmental issues) are beyond any doubt.

Keywords: climate change, disengagement, environmental crisis, journalistic norms, media coverage

Resumo: A crise ambiental e as mudanças climáticas pertencem a um grupo de tópicos que parecem não estar a receber tanta atenção dos *media* como por exemplo a política, economia, finanças ou as questões sociais e étnicas. Embora o ambiente tenha algum escopo em notícias e documentários, nem sempre é apresentado de forma abrangente. Embora ambientalistas e eco filósofos estejam constantemente - e cada vez mais urgentemente - apontando para aquilo que descrevem como uma situação alarmante, parece que a maioria do público adotou uma postura bastante indiferente (desinteressada) em relação a notícias sobre uma iminente crise ambiental, mudanças climáticas, aquecimento global, uso de plástico etc. O discurso público e o discurso dos *media* estão cada vez mais entrelaçados, permitindo que as pessoas comuns adquiram a maioria das informações (não apenas) sobre questões ambientais através dos meios de comunicação de massa como a imprensa, internet, rádio e televisão (noticiários e documentários). Este artigo discutirá as possíveis relações entre a apresentação de questões ambientais nos *media* e as atitudes do seu público. Acreditamos que os *media* devem assumir a sua parte na conscientização pública sobre questões ambientais. Este nosso artigo será baseado em pesquisas interdisciplinares, predominantemente teóricas, envolvendo a combinação de estudos e filosofia dos *media*. Discutiremos as principais características desta questão do ponto de vista das teorias centradas nos *media*, pois acreditamos que os efeitos dos *media* na realidade empírica e social (incluindo questões ambientais) estão para além de qualquer dúvida.

Palavras-Chave: crise ambiental, cobertura dos *media*, desinteresse, mudança climática, normas jornalísticas

Introduction

We have been witnessing in recent decades ever more frequently the appearance of certain climate phenomena that we tend to consider as “abnormal”, “unexpected” and threatening to human activities. Meanwhile, quite a few passive observers who learn about a surprising flood or late spring frost from TV react to it by telling themselves that they should just get used to weather whiplash, may they like it or not. Adaptability is obviously a welcome capacity of any living species, but climatologists’ warnings have been ever more urgent, suggesting that passive adaptation, i.e. ‘getting used’ to changes, is far from being enough here. Instead, active adaptation and regulation of people’s behaviour in order to improve the present situation are needed. With this in mind, it is startling to see that the mass media, when reporting on various climate phenomena, too frequently content themselves with mere descriptions of what happened and no more than static definitions of the problem, paying minimum attention to possibilities of active confrontation with the issue. At the same time, we consider the media – in any form – as significant factors of not only media discourse, but also of de facto public discourse as such, given that the public is mostly composed of recipients of media communication. It follows that the way of how the media report on environmental issues significantly shapes attitudes held by the public towards the problem. This point is looked at more closely in this contribution.

1. Man-made Effects on Environment, Climate Change and Anthropocene

If we now encounter the issue of environment in the media, it is very likely that it will be no piece of good news. This is partly because the reporter wanted to highlight the problematic element of the story. Meanwhile, it is obvious that mere theoretical debate and description of the climate system, including its parts, is not enough to deal with the present situation. Alerting voices are being raised ever more frequently, but they are immediately challenged, as is challenged the fact that current deteriorating climate developments are down to human activities. Nevertheless, a dominant majority of climatologists now concur that the present climate change is really first and foremost man-driven.

The climate system is traditionally understood as an interconnected complex of five major components: the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the lithosphere, the cryosphere (ice, snow and permafrost), and the biosphere. D. Houghton also adds external factors, including sun, orbital parameters of the Earth, topography, distribution of landmass and oceans, and composition of atmosphere and oceans (Houghton, 2002, p.3). These factors have a one-way relationship with the climate system, i.e. while they have effects on the climate system, there are no effects in the opposite direction (except for the composition of atmosphere and oceans). All these factors cause changes in climate conditions, but it is man who has become one of the principal agents when it comes to climate. There is a certain diversity in the understanding of the term *climate change*, with some (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change/IPCC, for example) describing it as any change of climate conditions observed in time, irrespective of the agent, while others (including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change/UNFCCC) use it exclusively for human-induced changes (BACC, 2008, p.1). As we know that the climate system has its own dynamics and natural variability even without excessive effects of human activity, for more intelligibility, we will henceforth use the term *climate change* for human-induced shifts in any given component of the climate system. Meanwhile, changes to the climate system not caused by man are considered as natural variations of the climate (Houghton, 2002, p.3).

The climate change is part of a broader problem called *environmental crisis*. Richard St’ahel believes that in environmental thought, the term crisis could be explained on the background of terms *problem* and *disaster* (St’ahel, 2019, p.35). Problem is a term used for labelling a difficulty or obstacle that can be overcome, while disaster indicates a definite doom. In line with these considerations, the environmental crisis (1) is a situation that has emerged following an extreme accumulation of unresolved environmen-

¹ Along with R. St’ahel, we make a distinction between the terms *environmental crisis* and *ecological crisis*: we view the ecological crisis as a critical situation of environment, with (natural) scientists focusing chiefly on biological

tal problems, but it still has not reached the point of an environmental disaster, which is nevertheless looming large (ibid., 36). It seems that when it comes to the environmental crisis as an array of related problems, the climate change is the most acute of them, mainly with regard to the future of the planet and humankind. The issue of climate change was outlined perhaps for the first time back in the earlier half of the 19th century (as Jean Fourier pointed to a phenomenon nowadays called the greenhouse effect), but it received more considerable attention from experts as late as after Charles Keeling measured the share of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere in the second half of the 20th century. M. Rahman notes that what had been an exclusively expert issue began making its way to general awareness in late 1980s (Rahman, 2013, 2).

The acceptance of the fact that many climate changes had been caused by humans, led to the emergence of a new concept describing processes in the ecosystem at the turn of the millennium – the theory of Anthropocene. It says that humans play a decisive part in changes to the Earth's ecosystems (Foster; in Angus 2016, 8). It is widely held that the Anthropocene dates back to the so-called Great Acceleration in mid-20th century. In the Anthropocene, "human activity is having a dominating presence on multiple aspects of the natural world and the functioning of the Earth system" (Malhi, 2017, p.25.2). Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer are credited for using the term for the first time, as the title of one of their articles in 2000 (ibid., 25.3). Even though the Anthropocene has still not been acknowledged officially as the current geological epoch (replacing the Holocene), it has nevertheless a sense in re-programming the collective mind and ushering in a new framework of thinking (ibid., 25.23), which would not hesitate to consider risks that need to be tackled now.

processes (St'ahel 2019, p.44). This point of view does not place human beings in a central position. Conversely, the environmental crisis includes other dimensions of the man-nature relationship (social, psychological, philosophical, theological, historical, legal, economic and political dimensions), and so it is primarily being dealt with by humanities (St'ahel, 2019, p.45-46), with humans being "more involved in the story".

2. Environmental Awareness of Media Audience

Any reflection of recipients' approach to media reports on climate change needs to consider their environmental awareness, as this largely influences the way of how they process such information. On the other hand, their environmental awareness can also be influenced by media contents. The level of environmental awareness among recipients is to a considerable extent determined by certain (prior) knowledge on the issue and various external and internal (psychological) factors.

There are two basic tendencies in individuals' attitudes to environment and nature. We might assume here, hypothetically, that a majority of the media audience, moulded by consumerist culture, is very likely being driven chiefly by anthropocentrism. Conversely, many environmental activists assert strict biocentrism to counter such attitudes.

The current condition of the ecosystem is widely considered to be the result of anthropocentrism that has gone unchecked for centuries. According to this attitude, humans consider themselves to be the "crown of the creation" and the central and dominating element of nature, so this status gives them the right to do anything that could foster further growth – be it economic, demographic or any other. Uncritical anthropocentrism in extreme cases borders to unlimited egocentrism, which can hardly be morally accepted. Such attitudes, in turn, have bred panic among those who realised the severity of the situation, boosting a counter-reaction platform – the so-called biocentrism, a concept promoting equality between humans and nature. Although it might seem that the present situation would force everyone to choose one of the aforementioned platforms presented in their extreme form, the so-called critical environmentalism offers a different solution: R. St'ahel reflects the ideas of Juraj Kučírek and Ivan Dubníčka, the main figures of the Nitra school of critical environmentalism. They point out that absolutely biocentric attitudes towards nature – proclaiming equality of nature and humans, and at the same time making only humans responsible for the condition of the environment and its improvement – are philosophically unsustainable (St'ahel, 2017, p.80). As humans

only can reflect on the world only from their own position, their views are necessarily anthropocentric, so pure and absolute biocentrism appears to be impossible. Facing concerns about people's health and their very existence due to the climate change, St'ahel points to Kučírek's *environmental anthropocentrism* (ibid., 80), which is anthropocentrism enriched with awareness of humans' dependence on the environment. If we adopt this attitude, we will be free to assume responsibility for nature and living conditions, mainly those that can be influenced by ourselves. Environmental anthropocentrism is strongly interwoven with awareness of how human activity affects the environment. With this mind, we view critical environmental anthropocentrism as an idea apparatus that could be appropriate as a subject of public environmental education, as in comparison with the aforementioned attitudes, it seems to be the only one taking properly into account both humans and nature.

Environmental and ecological education is a factor of paramount importance for the formation of environmental awareness. Ecological education deals with the presentation of knowledge concerning processes taking place in ecosystems and their fundamental principles. Meanwhile, environmental education builds on ecological education, presenting knowledge on the man-nature relationship and impact of human activities on nature, at the same time reminding that human activities must be bound by certain limits (Eliáš, 2013, p.187-188). Environmental education, if it is duly elaborated, can be helpful in attempts to disengage from uncritical exclusive anthropocentrism, as individuals sticking to it do not have a natural tendency to challenge its sustainability.

With respect to the aforementioned theses, stating that (critical) anthropological way of thinking is natural to man, we maintain that recognition of danger to one's own existence is another important factor in the formation of environmental awareness. Nevertheless, such recognition is only possible after learning at least the basic principles of how ecosystems work. A number of researchers have examined hypotheses concerning effects of social attributes on environmental awareness, including age, sex, social status and political affiliation (Iuzuka, 2000, p.17). M. Iuzuka states

that there have been varying results, with one group pointing to clear correlations between environmental awareness and individual social attributes, while other studies have found only marginal correlations. Q. Duroy in his study found out that material wealth of a country does not have any significant effect on environmental awareness of its people, and if it has any, it is only minimal. Duroy was attempting to refute a hypothesis that people living in underdeveloped countries have minimum or perhaps even non-existent environmental awareness (Duroy, 2005, p.20). Instead, he ascertained that education, subjective perception of welfare and happiness, and the level of urbanisation – regardless of the degree of economic development achieved by the country – seemed to be more important factors in the formation of environmental awareness (ibid., 18). Iuzuka concurs with the point of rather negligible significance of material development achieved by a county on its people's environmental awareness (Iuzuka, 2000, p.41), while stressing that all the aforementioned social and cultural factors are surpassed by individuals' systems of values and their world-view, which serve as “filters for information and ideas” (ibid., 26) and major factors determining the individuals' eventual attitudes to environmental issues. Meanwhile, social and cultural factors are variables dependent on other determinants (ibid., 44).

A more detailed classification of environmental awareness was provided by a research group of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, which in 2015 carried out a research entitled *Faith, Morality and the Environment: Portraits of Global Warming's Six Americas(2)* (Roser-Renouf, Maibach, Leiserowitz, Feinberg & Rosenthal, 2016, p.6). The team of researchers identified six basic attitudes towards environmental issues in the public: alarmed, concerned, cautious, disengaged, doubtful and dismissive. Two-thirds (67 per cent) of the public displayed various degrees of concern (alarmed, con-

²This research examined attitudes in US society towards environmental threats, mainly global warming. It did not only focus on the perception and interpretation of environmental issues, but chiefly on correlations between environmental attitudes held by individual people, and their religious background and moral values.

cerned, cautious) about global warming, while 33 per cent stood on the opposite side (disengaged, doubtful, dismissive). Most of those who were identified as ‘alarmed’ and ‘concerned’ viewed global warming as not only an environmental, but also a moral problem (ibid., 8). At the same time a majority of the ‘alarmed’ believed that their attitudes towards global warming reflected their moral values (ibid., 33). Among the ‘alarmed’ the figure in both cases exceeded 80 per cent. Conversely, around one-half of the disengaged-doubtful-dismissive segment did not believe that their moral views interfered (had anything to do) with their attitudes towards global warming (ibid., 8), with only 11 per cent considering this environmental problem a moral issue (ibid., 33).

Further research in the United States has led to similar conclusions. This includes a report entitled *Climate Change in the American Mind* from March 2018, which discovered that only around 40 per cent of the public in the United States regard global warming as a moral problem, while there are even fewer those who look at it from the viewpoints of social justice, poverty and safety (Lieserowitz *et al.*, 2018, p.4). It can be concluded that global warming is generally viewed from the environmental, scientific, political and economic standpoints.

Even though it is true that individual recipients approach environmental issues presented in the media with certain prior knowledge and environmental awareness (both displaying various degrees of advancement), which in turn influence their engagement (or lack thereof), it must not be forgotten that the media can play a pivotal role in creating this awareness and thereby also contribute towards an active (or passive) response of the public to the problem.

3. Environmental Issues in the Media and Public (Dis-) Engagement

The term *disengagement* as used in this chapter will not exactly correspond to the aforementioned term *disengaged* as a category of moral awareness according to the *Faith, Morality and the Environment: Portraits of Global Warming's Six Americas* report. In our considerations, this term will also partially cover those who were identified above as ‘doubtful’ and

‘dismissive’. We believe that a lack of engagement in environmental issues is not necessarily a result of one’s indifference, but it is frequently due to doubts about severity of the situation and even disagreement with the scientific concept of climate change and its negative effects. This holds when the ‘doubtful’ and ‘dismissive’ are rather passive. Nevertheless, the same attitude can also motivate others to challenge environmental problems actively, so this part of the ‘doubtful’ and ‘dismissive’ are not be included among the ‘disengaged’ here.

Albert Bandura identifies eight basic psychological mechanisms motivating an individual to disengage their actions from moral standards that they ordinarily accept (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996, p.365-366). All these mechanisms can also be observed in the audience of mass media and its reactions to media content, including environmental issues. However, the same mechanisms also apply to media content, for example to statements made by politicians, corporation managers and spokespersons. This latter fact can significantly contribute towards motivating recipients not to be engaged in dealing with environmental problems, and instead even challenge them, fight against environmental activists and/or act as if there were no environmental problems at all.

The first mechanism as pointed out by Bandura is *moral justification* of one’s own destructive actions (towards environment) by proclaiming their moral and/or social benefits. Another mechanism is *euphemistic language*, i.e. attempts to window-dress actions to create favourable impression of otherwise destructive actions(3). *Advantageous comparison* of one’s own destructive actions to others’ actions that are indisputably worse is another effective mechanism. *Displacement of responsibility* to a legitimate authority and social pressure is also to be seen frequently, as is *diffusion of responsibility* in a group (organisation, political party etc.) and *disregard or distortion of consequences*, which are displayed in the denial and ignorance of climate change, frequently also accompanied by efforts to discredit environmental groups.

³S. Heald cites an example of “clean coal” (Heald, 2017, p.7).

The remaining two phenomena concern *dehumanisation*, as an act degrading certain people in regard to their human qualities and dignity, or viewing them as “the others”, and *attribution of blame*, with performers of destructive actions stating that they were forced to act in the criticised way in order to protect themselves, or they even go as far as to take pot-shots at victims of their actions (Heald, 2017, p.8). All the aforementioned mechanisms can significantly influence the formation of people’s attitudes towards environmental issues, including climate change.

The main factors in play when it comes to interpretation of information presented by the media and subsequent attitudes and actions by individuals therefore include their internal moral background and the degree of proclivity to disengage their actions from their moral principles, and the way of how a given piece of information is presented and structured. A survey carried out by Ruth Woods and her team on the content of three British daily newspapers (The Guardian, Daily Mail and The Daily Telegraph) in February-May 2014 revealed more than 200 cases displaying a lack of engagement and tendency to play down or deny the climate change. This represented almost three times the number of cases encouraging engagement in the issue (Woods *et al.*, 2018, p.251). We believe that current presentation of environmental topics in the media actually reinforces the attitude of disengagement in the public, as it activates the mechanisms as pointed out by Bandura aimed at suppressing people’s remorse for their destructive actions vis-à-vis the environment.

Several experts concur that perhaps the main obstacle in proper formation of environmental attitudes in the public is one-sided presentation of negative impact of climate change, while specific moves that could mitigate or even reverse the process are hardly mentioned. According to Elisabeth Arnold: “The predominant narrative is of an environmental tragedy, involving people with little hope or ability to respond” (Arnold, 2018, p.13). This one-sided portrayal of exclusively dramatic consequences creates negative emotions, which in turn stimulate the feeling of impotence among the audi-

ence. People affected by harsh climate conditions and environmental disasters are presented as helpless victims of ecological changes and sometimes also cruel bureaucracy, while their activities aimed at mitigating the situation and even partial successes are left unmentioned. Instead, Arnold recommends journalists to structure their stories to facilitate people’s perception of themselves as “agents of change” (*ibid.* 16), calling this approach “solutions journalism” (*ibid.*, 15). This is closely related to the theory of self-efficacy. Bandura states that “perceived self-efficacy is defined as people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1994). This concerns both individual and collective self-efficacy. It follows from this theory that if individuals should become engaged on behalf of environment, to discuss the issue and translate their opinions into actions, they must be motivated by a conviction that it is in their powers to influence the course of events. So, the fight against climate pessimism is obviously possible only when there is a visible path to improvement, with a decisive contribution of human activities and changes in behaviour.

Another notable problem related to media presentation of environmental topics is “reckless” application of essential journalistic norms, regardless of circumstances and scientific relevance of a given piece of information. While these core principles of ethical journalism are in fact “designed to contribute towards positive development of public discourse on individual issues” (Skačan, 2019), they also pose a “risk of mutilating this discourse” (*ibid.*, 2019). These standards include objectivity, accuracy and fairness (Boykoff, 2009, p.446). In addition, they can be supplemented by independence, humanity and accountability (Ethical Journalism Network, 2019). There are also some other specific norms in journalist practice (albeit they are not ethical principles), particularly present in commercial media; they include personalisation, dramatization, novelty and authority-order bias (*ibid.*, 446). Scrupulous efforts to produce balanced accounts actually often lead to a ‘false balance’, as scientific facts on cli-

mate change presented in a news story are subsequently watered down by opposing, yet utterly irrelevant claims downplaying the issue without any scientific evidence. The audience, predominantly composed of people who are no experts in ecology and environmentalism, has it hard to make out which of these two opposing claims is solid science. The provision of equal scope for scientific knowledge and ill-founded conspiracy theories by the media also inevitably decreases the perceived relevance of presented scientific theories. This can lead to a loss of interest among ordinary people to deal with environmental issues and, on the contrary, it nurtures doubts as to whether there are actually any climate changes and whether they are really dangerous. The same holds for media reports on the Anthropocene. L. Sklair notes that there is still a certain percentage of scientists who deny that a man-made climate change is indeed taking place, so the media are forced to choose between pessimism and optimism (denying climate change), or opt for providing scope for both. He asserts that the media mostly decide to go with optimism, with the theory of Anthropocene thus losing its relevance among recipients (Sklair, 2018, p.8).

Quest for novelty – which is another common practice in journalism – can also have significant effects on public views of environmental problems, as reporters always seek fresh and exciting stories, giving the cold shoulder to issues that have already been presented (Martyniak, 2014). This inadvertently creates an impression that the issue in question has already been resolved, or it is not as pressing as it initially appeared.

Last but not least, simple omission of environmental issues or, at best, their scant presence in news service of individual mass media is one of the most common causes for their underestimation. They end up being lost in a flurry of information on terrorism, migration, politics, economy and their effects on everyone's life.

Conclusion

It is not an easy task to demarcate influence of the media on environmental awareness of the public, as

any research in this area can be altered by quite a few variables, including respondents' age, social status, education, political affiliation, observance of moral principles etc. This study was not designed to engage in such research; instead, it attempted to make a critical reflection, or outline a theory, of possible dangers related to the way of how environmental issues are presented in the media.

Apparently, the media can deform public views of environmental issues not only by presenting them in a certain way, but also by omission. The negative impact in the latter case is pretty obvious – if environmental problems are absent from the media content, it seems that they do not exist at all, or can be dismissed as insignificant. This cold-shouldering of environmental problems could be called a *conspiracy of silence*, as E. Zerubavel puts it (Zerubavel, 2006, p.2): we often keep silent about problems that we recognize all too well, hoping that they would somehow disappear, only if we persist in refusing to acknowledge their existence. The most dangerous upshot of this social phenomenon is gradual toleration of such behaviour in the public and media discourse, effectively creating a collective conspiracy. According to Zerubavel, “conspiracies of silence prevent us from confronting, and consequently solving, our problems” (ibid., 87), as we tend to procrastinate, putting them until later, perhaps even shifting them onto next generations. It is important to note that if we compare silence to outright climate change denial, the outcome is actually the same: inactivity.

Things get more complicated when environmental issues are presented in the media in a rather unhelpful way, however. This includes too one-sided selection of topics (a problem related to the agenda setting), and, conversely, also false balance, which puts ill-based conspiracy theories on the same level with well-founded scientific facts. In addition, we must not forget one more factor that can do a great deal of disservice to the issue, albeit it is not so striking, but entirely natural when human psychology is considered: a pessimist tone of reporting by the media – as they highlight tragic consequences of individual environmental problems, without pointing to possible solutions – makes people lose heart and give up. So,

one of the most fundamental tasks for the media today is – apart from imparting knowledge, as described above – also to do their bit in replacing people’s feeling of helplessness with one of hope and with active interest, by pointing to opportunities of individual engagement to begin delivering positive changes.

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