

Media Routines and the Making of Environmental News: The Public Relations Approach

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ABSTRACT

The environment has become a global concern in the last few decades. This is because environmental issues and crises, largely caused by various human activities, with their attendant consequences, have continued to generate unwholesome challenges of our time. Many environmental issues have been at the front burner of global discourse. These include pollution, land degradation, climate change, population explosion, ecological depletion, generating sustainable waste, and waste management. Meanwhile, the process through which some issues become dominant while others fall out of visibility is connected to how public issues are defined through the power of the media. While acknowledging the pivotal role of the mass media as a primary conduit for environmental communication, the authors take a critical and theoretical approach to examine the influence of media power on the portrayal and perception of environmental issues. The study delves deeper into the often-overlooked influence of Public Relations (PR) strategies on media coverage and public discourse. The scholarly synthesis demonstrates that PR practitioners are not merely sources of environmental stories but act as agenda builders whose strategic engagement with media organisations, particularly through information subsidies, influences the visibility and interpretation of environmental issues. These engagements intersect with journalistic routines and news values to shape which issues become salient and how they are interpreted. The paper's integration of PR perspectives with agenda-setting and framing approaches, advances a more robust understanding of environmental news production as a negotiated process between journalists and strategic communicators.

Keywords: *media power, environmental communication, framing, news values, public relations*

INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century experience has confirmed that the continued existence of life on Earth depends on protecting the environment, hence its importance globally (Babu & Basha, 2007). The environment has, therefore, become an issue of global concern in the last few decades. This is reflected in the position of Singh (2000) that "environmental issues

are today no longer confined to geography and allied disciplines but have also drawn the attention of common people as environmental degradation has assumed a global dimension and is even threatening the very existence and survival of mankind” (p. 111). Governments, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations have shown a lot of concern about various aspects of the environment. This is because environmental issues and crises, largely caused by various human activities, with their attendant consequences, have continued to generate unwholesome challenges in our time.

Environmental matters are generally treated within the framework of natural human surroundings and activities, which include biophysical components and processes of natural environment of land, water and air. It also includes all layers in the atmosphere, inorganic and organic matters (both living and non-living), socio-economic components and processes of the human environment (Emmanuel & Alakinde, 2006). Currently, a good number of environmental issues are at the front burner of global discourse among stakeholders. These include pollution, land degradation, climate change, population explosion, natural resource depletion, generating sustainable waste, and waste disposal and management. Additional concerns include deforestation, melting polar ice caps, biodiversity loss, and shifts in climate patterns, ocean acidification, and disruptions in the nitrogen cycle, depletion of the ozone layer, acid rain, water contamination, excessive fishing, urban expansion, public health challenges, and advancements in genetic engineering. The United Nations has consistently emphasised environmental issues in its global mandates to the countries of the world. For example, six out of the seventeen (17) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) touch on environmental issues. Specifically, Goals 6 and 7 touch on *Clean water* and *Clean energy*, respectively. Goals 11 – 15 focus on *Sustainability*, *Responsible consumption*, *Climate action*, *Life underwater* and *Life on land*, respectively. There is, therefore, a need to deeply historicise and apply interdisciplinary knowledge that can help make sense of environmental changes in the twenty-first century.

The public concerns expressed about the environment have often relied on claims-making processes to gain public visibility (Hansen, 1993). As Hansen (1993) explains, the rise or fall of certain issues is a “poor indicator of the state and nature of environmental degradation” (p. xv). Coming from a constructivist perspective, the author further explained that the prominence of certain issues at specific times is largely, though not entirely, unrelated to their actual severity. Moreover, a decline in their visibility within public discourse does not necessarily indicate that these issues have been effectively addressed or resolved (Hansen, 1993).

The process through which some issues become prominent or dominant while others fall out of visibility is connected to how public issues are defined. The power of definition involves how issues are elaborated and kept in public arenas. The mass media constitute probably the most important and strategic public arena in any contemporary society. The mass media are very crucial in the process as they exercise definitional power in society, becoming the society’s main institution of meaning-making. This is

because it has become a reality over time that any issue that will attract attention, visibility and even resource allocation must be able to attract media attention and be promoted as appropriate. Advocates and sponsors of social issues must cultivate the attention of the mass media to register each issue in the public and/or policy agenda. Such advocates and sponsors are also labelled as issue entrepreneurs. They “hope that by propelling their problem up the agenda of relevant arenas, they may invoke the action which is required to ameliorate them” (Cracknell, 1993, p. 4). In addition, the mass media has also played a significant strategic role in expanding mass communication, facilitating the transfer of information and awareness, strengthening socio-political sociability processes, building common values and terms, enhancing the public sphere, and knowledge-oriented development (Firoozi, Mostafaye & Khaledian, 2014).

In other words, the media serves as the core of society, actively shaping attitudes towards the environment and influencing perceptions of environmental crises. The media shapes understanding of the human angle to environmental change, fosters imagination, and mobilises action on issues like climate change, sustainability, disaster management, and habitat degradation.

As societies deal with complex environmental challenges, there is an advancement of environmental communication into a critical aspect of research in the communication field. Recent research sees environmental communication as multidirectional, involving negotiation of meaning, public engagement, mobilisation, and importantly, shaping of public policy on environmental matters (Erbaugh et al., 2024). In this context, the definitional power of the media is reflected by their portrayal of environmental issues, which is not solely determined by their inherent importance but also influenced by strategic efforts of various stakeholders, including journalists, civil society organisations, and public institutions (Erbaugh et al., 2024). At the heart of this strategic communication is the use of relevant communication tools for shaping media narratives and promoting specific agendas aligned with certain interests. Through tactics such as press releases, media outreach, strategic partnerships, and sponsored events, strategic communicators, seek to influence the selection, framing, and dissemination of environmental news stories, thereby shaping public understanding of sustainability, corporate environmental sustainability, environmental risks and climate action (Capizzo & Luisi, 2024). Consequently, through the coverage of environmental stories, public relations becomes an important sources of information for journalists, which underscores the renewed interest among researchers on how organizational communication routines, shape media agenda and influence environmental news production.

Environmental stories come from routine interactions among key environmental actors who define issues and shape attention. Agenda setting and framing theories are two theoretical concepts in media and communication research that demonstrate media power to shape public opinion and draw attention to public issues. These theories offer a framework for how issues are given prominence in the public sphere and how

issues are constructed through certain narrative frames. They provide a useful lens for theoretically exploring the role of media routines and strategic communication in shaping environmental discourse. In previous scholarship, the concepts of agenda setting, framing, news values and media routines were independently examined or mainly from a journalistic perspective. This paper takes a more comprehensive look at environmental news production by integrating these concepts through a public relations lens. First, this paper introduces the media's influence on environmental discourse, then how news-making routines interact with news values. It then shows how the theories explain media influence and news construction. The paper conceptualises public relations as an agenda-building institution whose strategic communication practices are used to shape the salience and interpretation of the issue. The synthesis of these perspectives highlights the centrality of public relations in the construction and understanding of environmental issues.

Media Power and Environmental Issues

In the realm of environmental discourse, public relations remains crucial in shaping public perceptions and fostering environmental consciousness. Initially, the media's attention toward environmental issues was scant, mirroring societal disinterest (Ader, 1995). Moreover, environmental concerns were entangled with complex trade-offs, yielding inconsistent responses (Klineberg et al., 1998). The pre-1970s period witnessed newspapers' reluctance to embrace environmentalism (Pryor, 1972; Sellers & Jones, 1973), exemplified by the oversight of significant legislative milestones such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Terms like "environment," "environmental," and "environmentalist" were repurposed to popularise and promote a broader understanding of these issues (Leopold, 1933). Furthermore, the growth of environmentalism was intensified more through books, journals, reports, and citizen movements than media coverage (Klineberg et al., 1998). This burgeoning environmental consciousness reflected diverse citizen engagement, driven by demographical and geographical factors (Andrews, 1998; Klineberg et al., 1998).

Amidst this landscape, media's role as a conduit for environmental discourse becomes pivotal. Media representations shape public attitudes and behaviours toward environmental issues (Luedecke & Boykoff, 2017), bridging the gap between scientific insights and public perceptions (Hansen, 2011). Environmental communication emerges as a multidisciplinary endeavour, transcending technical jargon to engage diverse audiences (Allen, 2001). Environmental communication as noted by Hansen (2011), encompasses diverse social practices and symbolic expressions, where popular communication, ranging from graffiti and protests to television, serves as a medium for addressing environmental issues across multiple levels. Allen (2001) argues that the role

of the media in environmental communication and enlightenment is important because it is through forms of media, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, that people are informed. The digital landscape further amplifies the impact of media and communication on public understanding of the environment and decision-making (Hansen, 2011; Nisbet & Newman, 2015).

Hansen and Cox (2022) assert that framing environmental issues as a social problem, along with investigations into news coverage and media impacts on public opinion about the environment, can be traced back to the 1970s. Given that our world is mediatised and the success of all human endeavours seems to be tied to the mass media as a result of their power and framing techniques, the quest for environmentalism seems unachievable without media involvement. It is, therefore, suggested that the media is the link between ways of understanding the environment, often arbitrating public perceptions, attitudes, viewpoints, and behaviours related to environmental subject matters (Luedecke & Boykoff, 2017).

In this context, the strategic deployment of public relations becomes imperative. Public relations practitioners navigate media landscapes, leveraging strategic communication to amplify environmental narratives (Hansen, 2011). The mediatisation process underscores the symbiotic relationship between media and societal activities, emphasising the need for alignment with media logic to gain visibility and influence (McQuail, 2010). Thus, public relations practitioners play a pivotal role in shaping environmental discourse, strategically positioning environmental issues within media agendas to foster societal awareness and action.

Environmental communication through news values

News is a planned process based on certain professional and organisational rules and values. News is a manufactured product. As noted by scholars, news journalism is a structured and routinised process of producing a cultural product. Shoemaker & Reese (1991) aver that the news is produced according to practical considerations. Gaye Tuchman captures a major aspect of the regulated and routinised process of news-making. According to Tuchman,

The news net imposes order on the social world because it enables news events to occur at some locations but not at others. Obviously, reporters cannot write about occurrences hidden from view by their locations, that is, either their geographic location or social class (Tuchman, 1978, pp. 23-24)

News values are important aspects of the professional routine of news gathering and production and are criteria for determining what get captured by the news net. According to Golding and Elliott (1970), news values are criteria journalists use to select what is included or excluded for audience presentation and determine what to

emphasise or omit. They explain further that “news values are working rules, comprising a corpus of occupational lore which implicitly and often expressly explains and guides newsroom practice” (Golding & Elliot 1970, p. 114). These routine values include drama, entertainment, prominence, magnitude, negativity, importance, recency, proximity or nearness, elite, personalisation/human interest, among others.

News reporting focuses on elite figures and significant events, with journalists evaluating stories based on news values like novelty, drama, and proximity. Odd or negative events tend to attract attention, as they deviate from the norm. The principle of “man bites dog” illustrates this, highlighting the unusual nature of news stories. News must be fresh and relevant, prioritising recent events over past occurrences. Conflict is often emphasised in news reporting, reflecting the dramatic nature of events. Additionally, news is personalised to relate to people's experiences, emphasising human interest stories.

In addition to these news values, journalists are also conscious of their credibility and legitimacy. Hence, they accord a lot of importance to the notion of objectivity and balance in reporting. Objectivity entails separating facts from opinions, ensuring a fair representation of different perspectives. The foundation of journalism lies in truth-telling and factual accuracy, although critics argue that it can sometimes lead to a mere transmission of official statements. Maintaining credibility is essential, requiring journalists to balance opinions and evidence to provide a fair presentation of facts for public understanding (Tuchman, 1978).

The news making process takes place within an organisational setting. Two obvious organisational factors that influence the process of making news are ownership and control, and commercial market considerations. These are issues central to the political economy perspective in media studies (Gitlin, 1980). The aphorism, ‘he who pays the piper dictates the tune’, directs attention to the power of media owners, especially in terms of policy and resource allocation (Murdock, 1982).

In addition to organisational factors like ownership and control, the process of news-making is also influenced by public relations (PR) strategies and commercial market considerations. The role of PR in news production is palpable in the strategic alignment of news with commercial interests and market dynamics. According to Golding and Murdock (2015), economic and market forces define the fundamental characteristics of the broader context in which communication occurs. Hence, economic imperatives drive media organisations to prioritise stories that have commercial value, such as those related to housing and real estate, which often dominate the so-called environmental pages in newspapers. PR efforts are also geared towards ensuring that news content aligns with the interests of advertisers.

Moreover, the development of journalistic norms like objectivity can be attributed to the need to appeal to diverse audiences while maintaining commercial viability (Carey, 1969). Philips (1977) and Symthe (1977) explain that objectivity serves as a way of maintaining professional integrity while adopting strategies for an organisation's survival, allowing them to attract a diverse audience without isolating any important segment. By emphasising fact and truth-telling, media organisations seek to establish credibility and attract audiences who are commodified as targets for advertisers. One implication of this is the fact that, quite often, news is audience/reader-oriented to attract advertisements. The news values like drama, personality, visual attractiveness, and sensationalism are employed to meet this end.

Beyond this, news values ensure that the cost of news gathering is as low as possible. The beat system ensures regular supply of news with little or no effort. Officials manning the beats regularly supply reporters with stories. This again orients the news to official and elite sources. Elite and officials of organisations can subsidise the news production process (Gandy, 1982) through, for instance, provision of press releases, transportation facilities, organised events and ready access to spokesmen. The reliance on official and elite sources has made such sources primary definers of issues (Hall, et al., 1973). Such powerful sources have privileged access to the media due to their perceived expertise, authoritative societal positions, or representative roles (Anderson, 1993). To the journalists, such official sources are society's accredited representatives by virtue of their position and status.

The reliance on legitimate official location (beats) and official authoritative sources goes to meet the news media requirement for legitimacy, credibility and objectivity. This means that for any group to attract favorable media attention and coverage. It must be perceived by journalists to be legitimate, credible and authoritative.

The news-making process is heavily influenced by media routines, organisational constraints, and the event orientation of journalism. As noted by Dunwoody and Griffin (1993), events are the primary focus of journalists, with news often requiring a notable occurrence to warrant coverage. Ortega (1944) emphasises the journalist's tendency to prioritise sensationalism over perspective, reducing reality to momentary sensations.

From this observation, three fundamental points emerge. First, news is a constructed reality shaped by media routines and professional norms. Despite claims of objectivity, news offers only a partial account of the world, influenced by the routines and beliefs inherent in news production (Golding & Elliott, 1979). Molotch and Lester (1974) argue that newsworthiness is socially constructed, influenced by powerful sources that determine what is deemed important.

Second, journalists perceive and report issues through the lens of media routines, often prioritising dramatic or novel events over chronic risks (Dunwoody & Griffin, 1993). News values such as magnitude, novelty, and drama dictate coverage. This leads to a focus on sudden violent or sudden environmental occurrences like earthquakes and massive flooding, whereas less visible but chronic environmental risks tend to attract little or no attention (Singer & Endreny, 1987). Journalists, constrained by deadlines and the demand for fresh stories, often lack the time for in-depth analysis or consideration of long-term perspectives (Phillips, 1977). Third, environmental reporting emphasises blame or cost calculation rather than providing comprehensive risk information (Singer & Endreny, 1987). The episodic nature of environmental reporting means only events, particularly negative ones, receive attention, perpetuating a cycle of sensationalism and overlooking broader ecological issues.

Theoretical Foundation: Agenda setting and Framing

The power and importance of the media can be explained by their agenda-setting and framing functions. The central idea about agenda setting is that the mass media, by the way, and manner of their presentation, designate what the key issues are and what the public perceives to be important. In essence, the priority given to issues in media coverage has some influence on the public perception of the importance of such issues. Thus, the media plays a significant agenda-setting role by influencing both the selection of topics that attract attention and the frames through which these topics are perceived (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Agenda setting refers to the notion that there is a strong relationship between the importance that mass audiences attach to particular topics and the focus that the media place on them (for example, based on the relative placement or amount of coverage) (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The fundamental tenet of agenda setting is stated succinctly by McCombs and Shaw (1972): "Editors, newsroom employees, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality in choosing and displaying news." The quantity of information in a news piece and its placement teach readers not only about a particular subject but also how much weight to give it. (p. 176)

The agenda-setting process underpins two basic assumptions: the media filter and shape reality, and the media ascribe importance to issues transferred to the public perception of the issue's importance. Agenda-setting research revolves around these assumptions (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995; McCombs, 5; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McQuail (2010) observes that the level of attention the media devote to a topic is generally believed to influence the degree of importance audiences assign to it (McQuail, 2010). Similarly, Baran (2009) explains that when the media repeatedly allocate significant airtime or space to a particular issue or event, information consumers tend to perceive it as highly important (Baran, 2009).

The media's agenda-setting function, as noted by McCombs (2005), is evident in its repeated coverage of public issues over time. This leads to a significant correlation

between the issues ranked on the media agenda and those considered important by the public (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). Consequently, the media's selection of issues influences public perception, shaping their views, attitudes, and actions (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). In essence, agenda setting establishes a pattern of issue prominence in news coverage, prompting the public to assign importance to these matters. Likewise, Anaeto, *et al* (2008, p. 89) asserts that the agenda-setting theory proposes that the facts which people know about public issues tend to be those which the mass media presents to them. Also, the significance which people ascribe to the same issues tends to be proportionate to the amount of attention given to these issues in the media. Hence, it is assumed that the media sets the agenda for our general discussion. The media may not always determine what we think, but surprisingly, we, as Anaeto *et al* opine, tend to think most of those things the media highlights as important.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) argue that the media's influence lies not in persuasion but in capturing public attention through agenda-setting and establishing the criteria that shape public judgment through priming. Based on this, many interest groups struggle to influence the media agenda. Research has shown that the media agenda is set by others. Williams (2003) avers that research on media agenda-setting has highlighted the interactions among interest groups, government officials, citizens, and politicians, among others, as they seek to shape what the media portrays as significant. The ability to succeed in influencing media agenda, of course, depends on several factors. Crucial is possessing the required material resources, social and cultural capital and requisite skills. These resources are, of course, not equally distributed in society. This perspective may, therefore, support the position that the media are agents of the powerful.

Similarly, the media frame issues to influence the public towards the direction of those issues. Entman (2002) refers to framing as a way to describe the power of a communicating text. Entman (2002) notes further that "analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location- such as a speech, utterance, news reports or novel- to that consciousness" (Entman, 2002, p 391). Gitlin (1980) states that media frame makes the world beyond our direct experience looks natural. Framing relates to "persistent pattern of cognition, interpretation and presentation of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (Gitlin, 1980, p.7). Additionally, the concept of framing, which includes salience and selection, is defined as the process of choosing certain aspects of a perceived reality and emphasizing them in a communicative text to support a specific definition of the problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Frame has been described as cognitive window or map through which we negotiate multiple realities (Gamson, 1992). Many textual devices are available for frame building- use of certain words and phrases, choosing pictures and films, typefaces, headlines, and use of some news sources.

Framing, McCombs (1992) defines, is the act of selecting a limited number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when dealing with a specific topic (p. 37). In addition, framing emphasizes how different issues and entities such as individuals, groups, organizations, and nations, are portrayed in the media rather than their salience in media-related discussions (Weaver, 2007). Framing, then, is seen as one of the major explanatory variables that distinguish levels one and two of agenda-setting theory (Weaver, 2007). Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) also state that framing is actually substantially different from accessibility-based models such as priming and agenda-setting. This discrepancy comes about because framing determines how issues are presented in the media and the intrinsic influence of common perceptions on audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Moreover, framing is understood to operate at both the macro and micro levels.

On a macro level, framing involves the various techniques used by the media to package messages in ways that align with audiences' pre-established cognitive frameworks or schemas (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In this way, journalists use framing to break down complex topics and refer to them appropriately (Gans, 1979). In contrast, on a micro-scale, framing is the criterion upon which audiences eventually assess and use the information presented in order to form attitudes and impressions (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Therefore, framing can be defined as a tool of structuring, defining, and organising any news story (Weiss, 2009).

Many media scholars have argued that journalists sometimes use subjective and biased approaches to news coverage. The way an issue is framed by journalists influences the audience's interpretation or prioritisation of the issue, including what will be defined as most important and what will be either ignored or downplayed (Weiss, 2009). This view is in line with the framing theory, as specifies some aspects of reality and minimises others, such that the audience's understanding, reaction, and action are affected (McCombs, 2005). Thus, the framing of issues in the news agenda can determine audience behaviour by influencing what issues are chosen for viewing, regardless of the nature of the messages involved.

News framing is one model of framing most relevant to public relations, incorporating many of the notions of framing, including attributes, situation, action, and responsibility framing, among others. Although the framework itself has gained considerable attention in the past decade as a tool to analyse the news processes and their effects, the influence of public relations as yet another source of news framing has been greatly neglected (Hallahan, 1999).

It can be argued that framing is not just beneficial but crucial in the realm of public relations. When crafting campaigns, PR professionals essentially act as frame strategists, aiming to determine how various elements such as situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, and responsibility should be presented to achieve favourable outcomes for their clients. These framing decisions are arguably the most critical strategic choices made in PR efforts. From strategic framing, PR communicators derive specific themes which are key messages or arguments that the public may consider in

discussions on shared topics of concern. Hallahan (1999) further emphasised that framing serves as the groundwork for selecting images and other framing devices that can be utilised to emphasise and reinforce core concepts. Ultimately, framing establishes the framework for how individuals are encouraged to assess information, make decisions, or take action.

Though there is no intention to get into the debate of whether the media exercise power in their right and interest (McQuail, 2010) or they are mere agents of power (Altsthuill, 1984) available to those who can effectively use or manipulate them, there is no doubt about media power. Media power is exercised in many ways: gatekeeping, status conferral, control over visibility and publicity (whether positive or negative), providing windows through which we see our world, defining reality, setting the agenda, and framing issues, among others. The summary of all this is that media power lies in defining issues and creating meaning.

The underlying point is that advocates or entrepreneurs for particular issues cannot rely solely on journalists to control the processes of agenda-setting and framing. Organisations and relevant agencies in the environment sector need to actively participate in shaping how their issues are presented and discussed in the media, rather than leaving it entirely to journalistic discretion. Through their communication experts and spokespersons who through strategic messaging and framing, they have the ability to shape narratives and emphasise specific aspects of the environment, priming journalists to focus on certain topics or angles while constructing environmental news stories. Furthermore, PR efforts can also prime the public's perceptions of environmental issues by influencing how these issues are portrayed in the media. This way, PR efforts can shape public attitudes, priorities, and behaviours concerning the environment.

From the foregoing, these two theories offer complementary explanations of how the media, through environmental news production give attention and interpret environmental stories to the audience. This process is operationalised through media routines and news values which guide journalists' selection and prioritisation of stories. This paper integrates public relations perspectives into this core idea by highlighting how institutional actors strategically package environmental stories to influence the media and public understanding of the issues.

Media Routines and Public Relations in Environmental News Production

Media routines are ordered practices that govern how journalists select and evaluate sources, verify the information and ascertain the newsworthiness of the event. While the journalist is often constrained by the need to adhere to reporting deadlines, limited expertise in the area of reporting and finance, public relations becomes a powerful supplier of news-ready materials which journalists often depend on (Duffy et al., 2019; Schäfer & Painter, 2020; Riaz & Hameed, 2023). This, therefore, makes the relationship between journalists and public relations an important aspect of environmental news production. Existing scholarship on media relations has demonstrated that this

interaction goes beyond transactional to the construction and negotiation of news agendas (Arqoub & Dwikat, 2023).

At the heart of this relationship is the well-established concept of information subsidies in public relations scholarship. These are communication resources that journalists depend on to reduce the cost of newsgathering. Information resources such as interviews, policy briefs, company reports, multimedia content, press releases, media briefings, and other organised events are largely provided by Public relations. An early study reported that environmental news reports were mainly generated from source–provided press releases and PR efforts (Hansen, 2011). Information subsidies are prominent in present-day journalism, in which serious economic pressures and limited newsroom capacity due to downsizing, has caused overdependence on institutional sources (Riaz & Hameed, 2023; Hansen, 2011).

In the context of environmental communication, the credible sources of environmental news include government environmental agencies, non-governmental organisations on the environment, international bodies, scientific institutions, advocacy groups, and corporate organisations that shape understanding of environmental problems and suggest solutions. As major sources journalists rely on, their role is not to replace journalistic independence but to provide journalists with the initial prompts for which environmental stories are constructed or developed. No doubt, this means that PR and strategic communicators may have an enhanced power to shape environmental policy news and climate science (Schäfer & Painter, 2020). This becomes inevitable with the technical and complex nature of environmental issues, due to their tendencies towards uncertainties and being politically contested. Therefore, due to the complex nature of environmental matters, journalists tend to seek expert interpretations of science into generally accessible narratives. PR therefore serves as an intermediary between the experts and the journalists by enabling access to scientific communication, facilitating media engagement and packaging contextualised research findings into familiar newsroom routine. Similarly, Erbaugh et al (2024) emphasised that effective environmental governance depends largely on a typology of public communication that is two-way operational, involving sustained communication among scientists, journalists, the public, policy makers, and civil society groups, among others. This is because it shows the greatest impact on conceptual frames, values and environmental behaviours compared to one-way or two-way informational communication (Erbaugh et al., 2024).

A systematic review of media relations scholarship from 1945 to 2021 reveals, among others, the dominance of theories such as agenda setting, agenda building, framing, and rhetorical theories in the field of public relations (Arqoub & Dwikat, 2023). From the angle of agenda–setting and framing theories, agenda building relates to institutional actors’ attempt to influence issues that attract media attention as well as the interpretative frames through which these issues are understood. Thus, the packaging of issues around environmental justice, environmental sustainability, biodiversity conservation, pollution and renewable energy reflects how environmental

organisations strategically build agendas for public understanding of environmental matters.

However, scholars contend that there are other guiding forces to journalists' orientation towards environmental stories. These forces include personal ideologies of journalists (Figueroa, 2020), and other structural forces such as newsroom routines, editorial policies, audience consideration and professional norms, which sometimes lead to writing from the standpoint of social justice (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021). Nevertheless, there are diverse opinions among scholars on balancing journalistic objectivity and independence and the underlying framing of environmental issues, with concerns about sensationalism and public distrust (Rashmi et al., 2025), perhaps due to greenwashing practices and the privileging of specific interests. Besides, some studies which analysed environmental journalism in different regions, all pointed to the notion that dominant political and business interests play an extremely influential role in the coverage of environmental issues at the national level (see Öztürk & Çıtak, 2010; Waisbord & Peruzzotti, 2009). As shown elsewhere in this paper, adherence to these professional norms and routines tends to orient the news toward the interests of the powerful and other social groups who are skillful in meeting the demands of those journalistic practices of news-making (Schudson & Anderson, 2009; Waisbord, 2009). The news net, it must be realised, is more often than not thrown into the river perceived to contain the right type of fish.

The balancing of the media and organisational relationships is more significant, with contentions around environmental issues moving beyond traditional reporting to citizen participation, advocacy campaigns and digital platforms, which further diversifies the voices in environmental discourse (Nguyen et al., 2024). This notion supports calls towards an increased research focus on the role of digital platforms, including misinformation and disinformation in public communication, especially on environmental matters (Erbaugh et al., 2024).

The changing aspects of the nexus of media routines and public relations in environmental news production signal the need to reinforce the strategic interface among key actors. Abdujabbarovna (2026) contends that effective media relations in environmental news production relies on news values, credibility, quality of evidence and framing, whereas poor relations may lead to selective framing, reputational crises and poor visibility. Abdujabbarovna (2026) further argues that an effective approach combines evidence-based communication with journalistic independence and public-interest framing. Public Relations principles as identified by Osho (2008), such as transparency, respect for journalistic integrity, providing valuable resources, collaboration, and cooperation, can be effectively applied to build trust, aid objective and accurate reporting by journalists, and foster relationships while presenting as a credible and trusted source of information on environmental concerns. Similarly, Erbaugh et al (2024) make a case for research focus on deliberative communication, involving citizen communication using democratic ideals. This paper posits that this approach allows PR professionals to work collaboratively with journalists to ensure that

environmental issues are covered accurately and comprehensively, while also promoting their clients' interests responsibly and ethically.

CONCLUSION

The powerful nature of the mass media and their consistency in shaping our reality has attracted scholarly attention to environmental news, a specialised area of journalism. This theoretical paper contributes to demonstrating how environmental news production can be viewed through complementary theoretical lenses with public relations performing a very distinct role. Integrating of public relations perspectives demonstrates how environmental news does not emerge solely from editorial independence of the media or the neutral reflection of reality as far as environmental matters are concerned, but as an agenda-building effort of institutions that shape the prominence and interpretation of environmental issues. Therefore, by viewing environmental news production from the public relations perspectives, this paper argues that the making of environmental news is a negotiated process involving the interaction of strategic communicators and journalists in ensuring public understanding of environmental matters.

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