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**ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS AS NEWS SOURCES: A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH
TO THE STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT

The interconnectivity between climate change and critical economic, agricultural and social matters presents challenges in communicating the complexity and urgency of dealing with climate change. Commentators have criticised environmental journalism in Africa for its superficiality, inaccuracy and disassociation from broader developmental issues (Wasserman, 2012), thus generating a call for better communication that shapes adequately informed and pro-active African citizens. A precursor to a study on the interaction between the media and non-governmental news sources, this article argues that attempts to address the media's shortcomings should begin with a closer assessment of the politics of representation within mass media coverage of climate change. Beginning with an exploration of the literature on environmental organizations and the media, it shows that a media-centric approach dominates the study of news source strategies. As a result, this method emphasizes the impact of journalistic norms on news coverage by highlighting the dominant access of official news sources to news media. In so doing, the influence, or lack thereof, of the politically marginalized is neglected. In an attempt to bridge this gap, this article puts forward a framework which integrates concepts of journalistic norms and values with social constructionist views. Through this approach, environmental NGOs will be viewed as participants in the construction of climate change news circumscribed by social and political factors which determine their strategies and the extent to which they can enjoy media access.

Keywords: *Climate change, NGOs, journalism*

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I. Introduction

Climate change is one of the most complex and pressing issues of our time. The world's poorest nations will be the hardest hit by climate change. More needs to be done to pressurise developed nations into curbing greenhouse gas emissions and, more importantly, changing the culture of consumption that feeds global warming. In the light of this, environmental advocacy groups increasingly highlight the importance of addressing the socio-economic effects of climate change in Africa. For a continent battling to achieve its Millennium Development Goals, social, political and economic redress is even more complex in the face of global warming as increased extreme weather conditions pose severe implications to food security, human settlement and health (Toulmin, 2009). The interconnectivity between climate change and critical economic, agricultural and social matters presents challenges in communicating the complexity and urgency of dealing with climate change. Commentators have criticised environmental journalism in Africa for its superficiality, inaccuracy and disassociation from broader developmental issues (Wasserman, 2012), thus generating a call for better communication that shapes adequately informed and pro-active African citizens.

In recent times, emerging scholarship from the global South has begun to theorise possible frameworks for the improvement of climate change reporting in the media. The dire need for contextual and sustained coverage of climate change issues has led to calls for the adoption of developmental journalism (Mare, 2011), a broadening of coverage to improve public participation (Batta, 2013) and even a rethinking of environmental journalism as 'slow journalism' (Gess, 2012) and 'green pen journalism' (Rao, 2012) to tackle the ethical and

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ideological constraints of neo-liberal media policy and globalisation. Coupled with formal training in environmental journalism scholars agree that the inclusion of local voices, stories, and contexts could significantly “educate and inform rather than mystify and alienate” (Mare, 2011, p. 15) the public.

Continuing with this growing avenue of scholarship this paper aims to contribute to the conversation by proposing a source centred approach to environmental journalism research in South Africa. A precursor to a study on the interaction between the media and non-governmental news sources, this article argues that attempts to address the media’s shortcomings should begin with a closer assessment of the politics of representation within mass media coverage of climate change. As recently pointed out by Jones (2012), environmental issues in South Africa tend to gain traction when “elite and influential people ... from privileged groupings” (p. 33) protest against fracking in the Karoo, for instance, while concerns against dune mining in KwaZulu-Natal receive little notice from journalists. This example highlights the need to investigate which environmental issues are privileged over others and whose voices garner a platform to air their grievances. The objective is not to point out another flaw in climate change reporting. Rather it is to work towards bridging the gap in knowledge required to “generate the level of public engagement required for policy action” (Nisbet, 2009, p. 3) on matters concerning citizens from all sectors of society. This is particularly significant in a country like South Africa where the need to sustain a thriving economy contrasts starkly with abject poverty.

In a study on the representation of climate change in South African media Orgeret (2010) asserts that the country’s need to balance “international competitiveness” (p. 304) and

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socioeconomic issues has resulted in a dichotomous discourse on climate change. On one hand, South Africa already emits high levels of greenhouse gases. This is predominantly a result of the country's reliance on coal for electricity, which the Department of Energy predicts will increase emissions by 2% each year (Department of Energy, 2010). On the other hand, it is a country riddled with poverty and predicted to be one of the countries' worst affected by impending environmental catastrophes. Consequently, framing South Africa's climate change issues in a polarized discourse encumbers the conception of environmental solutions that offer socioeconomic redress. In order to bridge the knowledge gap, the expertise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can be leveraged to improve understanding of climate change and its effects on social and economic problems. Since NGOs "produce and distribute a wealth of information, NGOs may contribute to the expansion of the type and number of sources" (Waisbord, 2011, p. 143) available to news organizations consequently enriching the climate change debate.

Bestill and Correll (2001) argue that "in the context of international environment negotiations, information is the primary tool used by NGOs to exert influence" (p. 81). Information as the currency of influence extends to the day to day communicative activities of NGOs. However, "significant organizational differences between the NGOs and their campaigns" (Hall & Taplin, 2007, p. 325) warrants closer inspection of the pathways by which that information is produced. By honing in on the production process this study draws attention to the context in which environmental NGOs construct climate change discourses for the purposes of infiltrating the public sphere. Drawing from the principles of sociological

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journalism, this study employs a source-centred approach which asserts that “both the agenda and the content of journalism are in significant part the product of the communicative work of non-journalistic social actors” (McNair, 1998, p. 143). Shifting the focus away from the media centric studies dominant in the past two decades, this study aims to improve understanding of how civil society shapes environmental discourse. By studying environmental NGOs as news sources, this research aims to provide insight into the strategies and tactics they use to access mass media. Furthermore, it will attempt to explore the extent to which environmental NGOs are successful in overcoming barriers to media access.

The main questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What factors influence the choices made in constructing the strategic media campaigns of environmental NGOs?
2. What kinds of media strategies do environmental NGOs use to promote their organisational goals?
3. To what extent do implemented communication strategies fulfil the expectations of environmental NGO communicators?

While research has firmly established the privileged access of official sources to news media as a staple of journalistic practice, the emergence of a robust and vocal civil society in environmental debates reflects the options available for the politically marginalised to contest media power. The aim of this paper then, is to investigate the communication strategies employed NGOs and the extent to which these various strategies are successful in gaining media

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attention. It begins with an exploration of the literature on environmental NGOs and the media, followed by an analysis of some of the theoretical underpinnings of news source study. The paper concludes with a summary of the literature and a discussion of how the findings from the review enrich this study.

II. Climate Change, Environmental NGOs and the Media

In the past two decades the canon on the representation of climate change in the western media has grown to include studies on the media's role in shaping discourse and action on climate change. While a significant proportion of the research has highlighted the impact of journalistic norms on the reporting and framing of the climate change in various countries (Antilla, 2005; Boykoff, 2007; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007) little research has been conducted into the communication strategies used by climate change actors whether scientists, politicians or activists, to gain access to the mass media. Given the proliferation of NGOs and their increasing visibility in the public sphere, media studies connected to NGOs have predominantly focused on visual and iconographic climate change campaigns (Brönnimann, 2002; Doyle, 2007; Hulme, 2004; Manzo, 2009).

The general consensus is that NGO climate action campaigns require new forms of representation if they are to inspire meaningful change. Contrary to the historical narrative of the impending dangers of climate change, such campaigns “represent temporally the *already seen* (author's emphasis) effects of climate change” (Doyle, 2007, p. 129) mitigating the sense of urgency required to tackle environmental issues. Indeed the use of fear and doomsday images in

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environmental advocacy media is problematic and raises many questions. This further highlights the complexity of advocating for an issue in which part of the solution requires an overhaul of longstanding human behaviour and economic conditions.

Whether devised to evoke long lasting behavioural change or spur policymakers to action, the topic of strategic NGO campaigns has mainly concentrated on prominent Western organisations. Typically well resourced, these organisations appropriate corporate media strategies such as PR and branding, to increase visibility in the competitive media landscape. On one hand, NGOs “have at least intermittently succeeded in sensitizing mass publics, politicians, and other decision- makers to environmental issues that would not otherwise have been so salient” (Rootes, 2004, p. 633). On the other, corporate marketing strategies leave NGOs vulnerable to compromising organisational goals in exchange for brand awareness and image preservation (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). In addition to corporate strategies, NGOs appropriate journalistic practices by cloning the news (Fenton, 2010). However, conformity to dominant media logic conflicts with the counter hegemonic practice of constructing an alternative discourse. While these studies highlight the pitfalls of NGO professionalization, they eschew the role of Western NGO campaigns in perpetuating a colonial discourse of vulnerability (Manzo, 2009) in the pursuit of donors, celebrity endorsement and brand power. Reliance on the media to achieve promotional goals means NGOs are forced to either play along or find ways to bypass media constraints.

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) posit that “the fact that movements need the media far more than the media need them translates itself into greater power for the media in the transaction” (p.

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117). The inequality of this relationship is further compounded by the media's favour of political primary sources. Yet studies have shown that NGOs employ a variety of strategies which succeed in countering barriers to mass media access. A common tactic is the cultivation of relationships with journalists and political newsmakers (Carroll & Ratner, 1999; Waisbord, 2011) to strengthen communication networks and boost support for social campaigns. In the case of the Chinese environmental movement, the founding of NGOs by professional journalists has led to increased coverage of environmental issues in the media (Yang & Calhoun, 2007).

Furthermore, the emergence of new media offers NGOs an opportunity to circumvent the asymmetrical dependency on mass media. More importantly, it affords NGOs easier access to constituents. In a study of social media use by American Red Cross communicators, Briones, Kuch, Liu and Jin (2011) found that social media enable NGOs to develop a two-way dialogue which fosters stronger relationships with their stakeholders. This has also led to improved communication with the media as news organizations who follow NGOs on Twitter and Facebook occasionally approach communicators for stories and information (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011). However, the lack of education on how to conduct social media marketing campaigns (Bortree and Seltzer, 2009) often means that NGOs fail to harness the benefits of social media. Furthermore, time constraints, lack of manpower and expertise results in failure to keep up with the demands of a fast paced digital world (Fenton, 2010). Additionally, despite some success with new media, the prestigious press and news television continue to be viewed as dependable avenues for "influencing public opinion and government policy" (Anderson, 1991, p. 460). Evidently new media is a double edged sword. However, these studies fall short

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of investigating the usefulness of online activism by exploring the extent to which constituents actively engage with environmental NGOs on social media.

The ability of environmental NGOs to circumvent barriers to access has also emerged in the increasing research on news sources of climate change reporting. Previous studies have often relied on quantitative content analyses of news coverage to determine the extent to which different environmental actors have access to news media. Evidence from these studies shows that scientists and government sources are often cited as primary sources in environmental coverage (Anderson, 1997).

As a result, they are primary definers of climate change issues and can frame climate change discourse to suit their own political agendas (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005). While these studies highlight the inequality of source access, “an examination based purely on the content of media coverage paints a rather one-sided picture” (Anderson, 1997, p. 133). It only provides insight into the types of sources covered by the media while eschewing how sources make the news and the strategies they use to get there.

The findings of Mormont and Dasnoy’s (1995) comparative study on source strategies across three countries emphasise that the construction of environmental news is an interactive process between journalists and their sources. This interaction varies according to context, and the efficiency of climate change communication is dependent on the extent to which news sources mediate the process. Anderson’s (1997) case study of the UK Daily Mail’s “Save Our Seals”

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campaign demonstrates that environmental groups have the capacity to act as primary definers by framing their claims within the legitimacy of climate science.

Furthermore, support from the media, however sensationalist or misleading the reporting may be, lends credence and increases visibility. Despite this, the oversimplified and sensational responses to environmental events by climate change campaigners and the media could prove detrimental to the sustainable in depth and robust debate required to tackle this complex issue (Anderson, 1997). Although source-based studies have highlighted the significant capacity of news sources in framing and shaping the mediatisation of climate change, there is a lack of comparative study of the differing ways in which “contending ‘claims makers’ seek to impose their definition of reality in order to shape public policy” (Anderson, Peterson, & David, 2005, p. 195). Inquiry into the differential approaches and influences of sources is essential as it illuminates the theoretical underpinnings undertaken in the study of the media/news source relationship. The following section looks at research from the sociological journalism paradigm to explore studies related to news sources. The purpose is to assess the relevance of this theoretical framework in relation to this study.

III. Sociology of News Sources

The question of the impact of news sources on journalistic output stems from the theory of sociological journalism. The theory deals “with the questions of what constitutes news, the factors that shape it and broadly argues that news is a social product shaped by the interactions among media professionals, media organisations and society” (Mabweazera, 2010, p.11). While the larger

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body of literature has focused on the political economy of communication and social organisation of the newsroom, the sociology of news sources is increasingly gaining importance as a focus of research.

In early journalism research, news sources formed a small part of larger empirical studies on political reporting and journalism practice. As a result, official news sources dominate the purview of sociological exploration of the media-source relationship, and as the evidence suggests, by definition of their status, have the capacity to set the news agenda.

Central to this view is the concept of 'primary definition' as put forward in a seminal study by Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts(1978), which states that official sources have the capacity to determine the "initial definition or primary interpretation of the topic in question" (p. 58). Official sources are considered the most newsworthy and often the opinions and interpretations of non-official sources are deemed as secondary definitions (Manning, 2001).

The interpretative power wielded by official sources subordinates the media orientating them "in the "definitions of social reality" that their "accredited sources" - the institutional spokesmen – provide" (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts, 1978, pp. 58-59). Although the primary definer concept was an aside to a larger empirical study on news production, subsequent studies on news sources continued with the tradition of primary definers by analysing the relationship between the media and state institutions. In accord, these studies emphasise the capacity of institutional sources to influence the "amount, timing and overall direction of social policy news" (Golding &

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Middleton, 1982, p. 121). However, even within this unison, the inadequacy of primary definition to account for the influence of non-official sources has received acknowledgement:

The press in amplifying some voices and muting others, in distorting some messages and letting others come through loud and clear, affects the nature of the opposition and hence of governance. The press does not do so on its own: groups differ in their ability to make their voices heard and to direct and shape their messages for the public. (Sigal, 1986, p. 37)

It was not until twelve years after Hall and counterparts that severe criticism of the primary definer emerged in a chapter by Schlesinger (1990). Studies that sought to disprove the primary definer soon followed suit based on several valid critiques. The first criticism was that “by concentrating upon the primary definition in the media, the structuralist model overlooks the processes of negotiation and conflict prior to the definitions appearing in the media” (Anderson, 1997, p. 68). The theory does not account for the contentions that occur within the organizations of the official news sources which, as Manning (2001) points out, is a serious theoretical flaw. Secondly, it fails to distinguish between primary definers and those marginalized from political discourse (Manning, 2001). Thirdly, it assumes that the media do not play a role in setting the news agenda and their subordinate role does not account for the variety of media institutions (Miller, 1993). Lastly, it implies that “counter definitions can never dislodge the primary definition” (Schlesinger, 1990, p. 66) effectively marginalising the engagement of non-official sources in the public sphere.

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As Miller (1993) found, “the strategies formulated by organizations to exercise power and influence often involve strategies for definitional advantage” (p. 400). The power of definition then, does not lie solely with the state. Any actor who successfully infiltrates the public sphere is capable of classifying the salience of an issue from the outset. This has emerged in literature on the relationship between public relations practitioners and the media where a reduction of editorial sources has led to reliance on news subsidisers (Curtin & Rhodenbaugh, 2001). Further, journalist’s inability to acquire information because of bureaucratic restrictions has, in some cases, resulted in the media relying on NGOs as news sources (Waisbord, 2011).

Hence, while the primary definer theory certainly highlights the dominance of official sources in steering and framing public discourse it too readily implies that their interpretation of reality is the only one available. This could be rectified by shifting the focus from the analysis of media texts and the investigation of journalist’s perspective to that of non-official sources.

Schlesinger maintains, “media sociology must abandon its exclusive orientation towards processing information and the content of messages, in short its media-centric orientation, in order to open itself up in an analysis of the field of information” (p. 45).

Although the media-centric view has been useful in revealing the inequitable use of news sources by journalists using a source-centred approach offers an opportunity to go beyond the top down model of the media/news source relationship. This approach views news sources as active participants within the news making process by illuminating the extent to which they contest media power and the tools they use to engage in this process.

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News sources access to media differs according to social and economic capital, the media environment and technological contexts. The findings of Deacon's (1996) study on the communication activity of the British voluntary sector illustrate this. Deacon (1996) explains that "it is 'insider' organisations – those with the most formal and regularised contact with official sources – who are most political in their communication activity and who have the greatest media importance" (p. 183). The choices journalists make on which sources to use are shaped not only by journalistic norms and organisational factors but also by the socio-political environment in which they operate. Furthermore, the extent to which non-official sources are successful depends on their position within this environment.

IV. Summary of the Literature Review

The prevailing literature presents a grim reality for environmental NGOs. Since the inception of the environmental movement, huge gains have been made in bringing environmental issues to the forefront of policy and social arenas. However, the campaign for visibility in the media wages on with increasing competition and technological advancement. NGOs have adapted by appropriating corporate marketing tactics and journalistic practices. They form alliances with sympathetic journalists, news making politicians and policymakers to circumvent the challenges inherent in a hegemonic media system. Increasingly, new media is emerging as successful means of environmental activism. Despite this, organisational constraints prevent NGOs from benefiting fully from new media marketing. It is essential to note that the bulk of the conclusions came out of studies based in the West signalling a paucity of research from a non-Western perspective. This presents an opportunity for expansion of the literature by providing localised accounts of

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environmental media activism in the developing world. Particularly because reporting on climate change in developing countries lags behind the rest of the world (Fahn, 2008), studying NGOs can provide insight into the valuable expertise civic society can offer to enhance the climate change debate.

Within the South African context, climate change coverage remains elitist and lacks “alternative ways of interpreting the issue into consequences and action at the life-world level” (Orgeret, 2010, p. 297). Investigating NGO media strategies can provide insight into the challenges that constrict civil participation in environmental issues. In addition to this, it presents an opportunity to discover successful means of conducting environmental media advocacy which could prove useful for organisations that lack professional media proficiency or personnel. More importantly, it could improve understanding of the relationship between the media and environmental news sources.

The studies reviewed on the sociology of news sources reveal important implications for the theoretical framework of this study. The studies show that current literature is dominated by a media-centric approach to the study of source strategies. This approach emphasizes the impact of journalistic norms on news coverage by highlighting the dominant access of official news sources to news media while neglecting the politically marginalized. However, according to Tuchman (1972 as cited in Manning, 2001):

... the hugely complex social world outside the newsroom can never be grasped through the production of one definitive, objective account. Rather, journalists engage in ‘strategic rituals’, as they work with each other and [with] sources to construct news reports. If one

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party's version of 'reality' is balanced by a competing account within the news text, then the 'objectivity' of that report can be defended. (p. 21)

Viewed within the arena of environmental coverage, this social constructionist approach to the media-source relationship in the development of climate change discourse raises implications for the effective communication of climate change. News media "are highly selective in the representation of risk and the environment" and these representations are "shaped by socio-political and cultural values" (Anderson, 1997, p. 134).

As such the communication of climate change is embedded within various discourses that news sources have to engage with in order to gain media access. Since the discourse of climate change is predominantly framed in science, environmental NGOs have increasingly taken up the scientific frame of reference in order to gain credibility within the debate. This has only served to marginalise ethical issues and address of socio-economic vulnerability of poorer countries (Gough & Shackley, 2001).

Additionally, in constructing environmental news, the news media have a preference for the dramatic image and the newsworthy sound bite. This has led to the use of visually strong media strategies by environmental news sources, which at once increase media traction and sensationalise and oversimplify the complexity of climate change. Evidently, the construction of environmental news is a heavily contested arena fraught with challenges. However, there are possibilities for improving access, diversity of voices and the quality of representation. For news sources, the "underdetermined nature of media discourse allows plenty of room [and avenues] for challengers

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such as social movements to offer competing constructions of reality” (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992, p. 391).

A re-evaluation of source strategies to incorporate other channels of communication such as radio (particularly in poorer countries) and magazines (Anderson, 1997) could go a long way in reaching variant constituencies. In the case of the media, rather than privileging one frame or representation over another, it is necessary to present “alternative sources of evidence” (Manning, 2001) which can accommodate a variety of voices and objectivities. Doing so will allow for increased access to the media and improve the quality of engagement so needed to advance meaningful climate change debate.

Any sociological account of environmental news sources requires the development of a framework that is “capable of handling the activities of non-official sources in a way that treats them neither as theoretically irrelevant nor simply views them from the media-centric standpoint of news processes” (Schlesinger, 1990, p. 77). In tandem with this approach, this study will view environmental NGOs as participants in the construction of climate change news circumscribed by social and political factors, which determine their strategies and the extent to which they can enjoy media access. More importantly, environmental NGOs operate within a specific context which must be recognised in order to achieve a holistic analysis of the social construction of environmental news.

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V. Conclusion

The issues inherent in communicating climate change are both complex and challenging. It is the aim of this study to reveal the extent to which South African environmental NGOs experience the challenges described in the prevailing research on NGO strategic media campaigns. On the whole, the evidence affirms that environmental NGOs face organizational constraints, struggle for recognition in a competitive media landscape and employ a variety of strategies to circumvent these challenges.

The extent to which NGOs successfully achieve traction is dependent on how well they conform to dominant media logic (whether well resourced or not). While this may increase visibility, it presents problems in achieving the organizational objectives of NGOs. Even though research has shown that, after official sources, environmental groups in South Africa take up 15% of climate change coverage in the media (Orgeret, 2010) pertinent questions still remain. Which environmental groups have access? How do they try to gain access? Are they successful or not? In what ways do they construct climate change discourse?

Using a source-centred sociological approach that recognises the intersection of journalistic norms with social, political and cultural influences on climate change reporting could help answer these questions. It remains to be seen whether the South African political-media system encourages or stifles meaningful participation of non-state actors in the climate change debate.

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