News and Conflict

How Adversarial News Frames Limit Public Understanding of Environmental Issues

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MOST OF US LEARN about environmental issues through the news, rather than by direct experience. Because of this, the news media, in environmental affairs as in other areas of public concern, is a "pervasive political and cultural force." Citizen's experiences of many environmental issues are mediated in large part by the news media and not surprisingly, corporations, state agencies, citizens and diverse public interest groups continually vie to influence the media's presentation of environmental issues. At stake are public perceptions, and ultimately, political significance.

In their efforts to engage the news media, however, many citizens and public interest groups have become frustrated and disillusioned by journalistic traditions, organizational and financial imperatives, audience preferences, and political and economic constraints. Many now realize that to raise public awareness and transform society's relationship with the natural environment, it will also be necessary to transform the modern communications environment. As a contribution toward this end, this article examines the implications of one significant feature of this environment: the adversarial framing of environmental news.

NEWS FRAMES

Contemporary studies of the news media are increasingly employing the concept of news frames in their analyses. The term "frame" was originally used in the early 1970s as a psychological concept describing how individuals include, exclude and organize experience. The concept was soon imported into media analysis by using it to examine how news media organize or "construct" reality. Although different researchers have since conceptualized news frames in slightly different ways, a useful summary definition defines a news frame as "a central organizing idea for news that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration." Frames, of course, serve an unavoidable function in news. They allow journalists and audiences alike to organize and make sense out of an almost infinite universe of potentially available information. But they become problematic when they are highly stereotyped and uniform throughout news discourse -- and a growing body of media research indicates this to be the case. Rather than constructing contrasting interpretive frames that offer diverse insights into complex and subtle issues, different media outlets tend to construct highly formulaic news frames "that reconstitute the world in similar ways." One widely replicated environmental news frame is the disaster narrative which, for instance, dominated media coverage of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. One way in which the Valdez disaster narrative was constructed was by comparing the spill to an earthquake that had hit the community 25 years earlier, and by covering the daily spread of the oil slick in a manner that resembled weather forecasts. The coverage therefore:

[N]aturalized the spill, effectively withdrawing from discursive consideration both the marine transport system and the prospective pursuit of alternative energy sources. The disaster narrative overtly moved discourse away from the political arena and into the politically inaccessible realm of technological inevitability.

Examples of other highly replicated environmental frames -- identified in studies of the Canadian news media -- include ailing-planet frames that employ metaphors such as "wounded earth" or "battered planet" to describe the state of the environment; ac-
counting frames that employ financial metaphors such as “environmental debt” and “environmental dividends”; or warfare frames that employ metaphors such as “fights” and “battles” to describe relationships between various actors in environmental disputes.6

It is toward this last frame – which I will refer to as the adversarial frame – that I now turn.

THE ADVERSARIAL FRAME

One need only glance at a small sample of contemporary news coverage to recognize that environmental issues are frequently framed in an adversarial manner, as seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between neatly defined, diametrically opposed groups.5

For example, British Columbia forest issues in the past decade have repeatedly been framed as a “war in the woods” in which “loggers” are pitted against “environmentalists” in an adversarial struggle over the apparently conflicting interests of “jobs” versus “preservation.”610 This adversarial framing has been employed extensively in both print and television journalism.11

Such frames are characterized by two defining features:

- **Dichotomy / duality** The most obvious feature of the adversarial frame is its representation of issues in terms of two distinct, mutually exclusive, stereotyped camps. Such a frame pits the views that allegedly represent one camp against the views of the other in a sort of dueling perspectives template. Within this macro-frame these two opposing micro-frames (i.e., the stereotyped perspectives of loggers and environmentalists) are contrasted.

- **Extremism / confrontation** Another feature of the adversarial frame is its dramatization of conflict through emphasis on extreme and confrontational statements and actions. Insult, accusation, and other divisive and demeaning modes of expression are thus selected for their high emotional impact. The angry shouts, slogans or actions expressed at forest worker or environmental activist rallies have often provided the raw material for such coverage of British Columbia forest issues.

In addition to these defining characteristics, the adversarial frame often has other features:

- **Positional arguments** Adversarial news frames typically amplify the positional statements and demands of the dueling camps – as opposed to probing and clarifying their underlying interests and motives. For instance, in coverage of forestry issues the media have tended to amplify loggers’ demands for continued clear-cutting versus environmentalists’ demands for the end of clear-cutting. Underlying interests and motives, however, have remained largely unexamined.

**Economic reductionism** Adversarial frames also tend to construct environmental issues in primarily economic terms. Such constructions imply that environmental decisions should be made primarily through cost-benefit analyses that aim to maximize material gain and minimize material loss. British Columbia’s forestry coverage has thus frequently focused on trade-offs between economic indexes such as “forest industry profits” versus “ecotourism dollars.” Such a reductionist approach, however, fails to address the more fundamental moral and ethical issues that underlie many forestry conflicts.

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE ADVERSARIAL FRAME**

Given the highly political nature of contemporary news discourse, what are the environmental implications of this adversarial frame? Perhaps most straightforward is its limitation of the range of perspectives presented to the public as a resource for decision making. This is true on both the micro and macro levels described above. On the micro level, the construction of forest issues from the highly stereotyped perspectives of “loggers” and “environmentalists” obviously excludes a wide range of other perspectives, both those of loggers and environmentalists (sometimes one and the same people) who do not fit the stereotypes, and those of many other citizens – from the lay person to the scholar – who have valuable insights to contribute.

On the macro level, non-adversarial ways of framing issues also tend to be excluded – along with the unique insights they provide. For instance, contrary to popular news stereotypes, a significant amount of common ground does exist between forest workers and environmentalists. Many are strongly allied in advocating environmentally sound alternatives to existing forest policies and practices. This common ground, however, does not fit neatly into the adversarial news frame. In fact, any instances of mutualism, co-operation, or reciprocity do not fit into the adversarial news frame and therefore tend to be excluded from news discourse. A non-adversarial frame is needed to examine these aspects of environmental issues. The adversarial frame therefore presents a consistently narrow, reified view of human nature and social change, characterized almost exclusively by adversarial relationships.

The emphasis on extreme and confrontational modes of expression also has significant implications. For instance, many people pursuing environmental reforms in British Columbia reject such modes of expression. By rejecting the politics of enmity, however, and purposefully adopting what they consider to be more constructive and conciliatory modes of expression, their perspectives are likely to be filtered out of news discourse. Thus there exists a systemic pressure to adopt extreme and confrontational modes of expression in order to engage in public discourse. Extremism becomes a ticket for admission to the public sphere – with very practical consequences. Such expressions tend to polarize issues and alienate social groups from one another. They tend to reduce empathy, lessen willingness to listen and close minds.
And they are thus a breeding ground for further misunderstanding, prejudice, enmity and conflict. The adversarial news frame therefore amplifies in mass-mediated discourse that which is most destructive in interpersonal communications and relationships.

The amplification of positional statements and demands also has important implications for environmental perceptions and policies. It obscures the underlying interests (needs, motives, aspirations, fears) that prompt those positions. For instance, as alluded to above, the position of loggers that was most frequently emphasized in the post-Clayoquot coverage was an insistence on the right to continue clear-cut harvesting. One of the fundamental interests underlying that expressed position, of course, is the desire for job security. By focusing on the expressed position however, news coverage tends to neglect or obscure other options that could provide job security in a more environmentally and economically sustainable manner, such as shifting away from highly mechanized industrial-scale harvesting toward locally owned and managed selective logging, combined with value-added manufacturing – an option that many forest workers, environmentalists and economists mutually advocate.12

The economic reductionism that typically accompanies the adversarial frame also has implications for environmental perceptions and decision making. Many environmental conflicts are not mere clashes of material self-interests that can be resolved through cost-benefit analyses and trade-offs. Rather, they often contain important moral/ethical dimensions, and therefore they require the clarification of those moral/ethical principles that we wish to abide by as a society – principles that are the basis not just of vague social norms and expectations, but of public policy, law and regulation.

British Columbia forest issues are a clear example of the need to clarify such underlying principles. Do the unfettered rights of corporations to pursue and accumulate profits constitute principles upon which we want to base our society? Or do we prefer principles of ecological sensitivity and economic sustainability? By framing environmental issues in a purely economic manner these questions are rarely given adequate attention, for the issues “are assumed to be not so much about establishing correct principles as about bargaining over who gets how much of what.”13

From the standpoint of many environmentalists, the news media thus promote a kind of ethical irresponsibility by framing public discourse as an ethical void. In the process they also disempower environmental advocates by taking away the moral ground in a dispute. As Amy Douglas points out:

The moral high ground is often an important political resource for environmental groups – especially if they lack other traditional sources of political and economic power. It gives them a kind of moral power. But as soon as one accepts the Conflicting Interests Model of Conflict, the whole notion of the moral high ground disappears altogether. Moral arguments become irrelevant. 14

**ALTERNATIVES TO THE ADVERSARIAL FRAME**

Recent decades have witnessed a groundswell of aspirations for more inclusive, participatory and democratic media from a range of social activists and communications theorists. These aspirations derive from a common recognition of the failure of the commercial media to support collective dialogue and deliberation on issues of broad public concern. Mid-century social responsibility thinking, or variations on the public sphere theme of Jürgen Habermas, or even the recently emerging public journalism movement all embody such aspirations in one form or another.15 These aspirations represent a common starting point for discussions of a more dialogical or deliberative alternative to the adversarial frame.

Four general features might characterize such a reframing of environmental issues.

**Diversity of perspectives** Effective public dialogue and deliberation cannot occur when complex and multifaceted issues are reduced to simplistic dueling perspectives. Dialogue and deliberation are most effective when a diversity of perspectives are elicited and considered. The range of perspectives that characterize the Canadian public is an indispensable resource in this regard. Endowed with a wealth of tremendous cultural and experiential diversity, Canadians would be well served if their news media purposefully and systematically drew on this diversity of perspective.

**A non-confrontational tone of expression** Effective public dialogue and deliberation also cannot occur in a discursive framework characterized primarily by extreme and confrontational modes of expression. Should not our public expression be tempered by the same courtesy, respect, dignity and care that we appreciate or expect from others in our private communications, even when we hold different perspectives? These fundamental qualities of expression have profound practical implications on any level of discourse. As discussed above, their neglect diminishes our willingness and capacity to listen to, understand and empathize with others, resulting in alienation, polarization and the breakdown of communication.

Such a recognition does not imply, however, that the media should simply demand that news sources bury their differences and express themselves in polite civil tones. Rather, it implies finding and facilitating modes of expression that allow conflicting perceptions, values and interests to be examined clearly and critically, but in an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual commitment. It also does not imply the desirability of cold rationalism in which emotion has no place. Emotion is fundamental to human experience and perception, and any effort to foster mutual understanding cannot ignore it. The emotional dimension of people’s experiences and perceptions can, how-
The emotional dimension of people's experiences and perceptions can be conveyed without the offensive and defensive posturing to which we have grown so accustomed.

Might not public discourse benefit from the conscious articulation and application of relevant underlying principles?

Ethical principles can be understood as referents for the creation of just and sustainable social relationships and structures. For instance, a growing consensus exists today around the idea that a just and sustainable society cannot be founded on inequity between the sexes. Equal rights, opportunities, and respect must be accorded both sexes, and reference to this principle must therefore inform social policy and practice. The exploitation of natural resources in a manner that impoverishes present and future generations and destroys natural ecosystems is similarly unjust and unsustainable. Intergenerational responsibility and ecological stewardship are corresponding principles that apply. Ethical principles are thus practical evaluative criteria with which social policy and practice can be measured and directed.

FURTHERMORE, a principle-centred discourse creates a very different social dynamic than one based solely on economic pragmatics. It shifts public discourse toward a new centre in which the instrumental rationality of state and corporate managers is balanced by the ethical judgements and aspirations of all citizens. It thus provides the voices of marginalized, oppressed, disenfranchised and silenced segments of the population a renewed legitimacy in the public arena, leveling the playing field of public discourse.

One caution, however, again needs to be raised. In invoking ethical principle as a basis for public discourse and policy, there will inevitably be those who tend toward the kind of intolerant and self-righteous moralizing characteristic of religious extremists, on the one hand, and toward the didactic moralizing that has characterized the party-press in many state-socialist societies, on the other. Neither of these tendencies, however, constitute such potential threats to Canadian society that we should forego experimenting with more moderate and constructive efforts to apply ethical principles to social concerns. Better to wrestle with and guard against these aggravating tendencies than to perpetuate the power-asymmetries that prevail in an ethical void.16

PROSPECTS FOR REFORM

The dialogical or deliberative reframing of environmental issues presented above represents a significant departure from the adversarial news frame. Is it realistic? Undoubtedly not — if one expects the immediate and wholesale adoption of the model by commercial mass-market news media. Journalistic routines and traditions, organizational and financial imperatives, audience preferences and expectations, as well as political-economic and ideological constraints all present potential barriers to such change. But, if one considers the rapidly changing nature of media forms and technologies, the emerging journalistic incentives to explore and create more civically functional forms of news discourse, the possibility of shifts in audience preferences and expectations, and the cracks and contradictions that do exist in our political and economic systems, the possibility of long-term change appears more plausible. But visualizing such change requires a shift from the quick-fix, short-term planning horizons that characterize so much contemporary thought, to a long-term, historical commitment.

Transforming our modern communications environment will require persistent, collective and concerted action. It will be necessary to identify the various fronts on which this action can occur, as well as the incentives, actors and resources that can be mobilized. For instance, many Canadian journalists initially enter the occupation with aspirations of public service, only to become frustrated and disillusioned with their work, resulting in an inordinate rate of attrition within the occupation.17 This is just one of the internal incentives that journalists and news organizations have for reform. In fact, many are struggling for such reforms already, as evidenced by the debate over public journalism ideas in Canada in recent years. Movement on this front needs to be encouraged and greatly expanded.

Another front on which media reform can be pursued is within the growing field of media education. Many educators, curriculum developers and even
policy makers are gradually recognizing the need for students and citizens to develop the critical skills to dig below the surface of media content and examine how it is constructed, how issues are framed, and what factors of culture and production shape it. Such efforts again need to be encouraged and expanded.

An exhaustive survey of the field of media reform is beyond the scope of this article, but these two examples illustrate that opportunities for collective action do exist and need to be pursued. And though radical change in the operation of the media is not imminent, from the historical perspective suggested above, the possibility of no change seems equally untenable. Media forms have always changed and evolved historically — sometimes in increments, sometimes in sweeping transformations, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. In considering the reform or transformation of the contemporary media, it seems that the appropriate question is not whether change will occur, but what forms it will take and at what rate it will proceed. Human agency has a role to play in determining the answers to these questions. In this context, those who are concerned about the state of the natural environment and humanity’s relationship to it would do well to link the struggle for the natural environment to the struggle for the communications environment.

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NOTES
2 Of course, the news media do not have a monopoly in this regard. Environmental perceptions are a function of many other mediated messages, including everything from interpersonal exchanges to advertising and entertainment media. Nor is the news media an autonomous force, producing and distributing isolated messages with predictable impacts. News messages are negotiated and contested in complex ways through all stages from production to reception. For an excellent Canadian study of source influences on news production, see R. Ericson, P. Baranek and J. Chan, Negotiating Control: A Study of News Sources. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989). For discussions of the manner in which audiences negotiate meaning in the decoding of media content, see S. Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” Culture, Media, Language, Hall et al., eds. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 129-158; and J. Woolacott, “Messages and Meanings,” Culture, Society and the Media, M. Gurevitch et al., eds. (London: Routledge, reprinted 1994), pp. 91-111.
9 Of course, the media do not act alone in constructing these adversarial frames. Many groups seeking to influence public discourse, from all sides of the political and economic spectrum, adopt adversarial communication strategies in order to gain media attention. For instance, the blockade at Clayquot Sound was, among other things, a highly effective media strategy that exploited the adversarial frame as an opening to the public sphere. Therefore many interests groups actively assist the media — through their staged expressions and actions — to construct these adversarial frames.
10 This conclusion and the characteristics that follow are supported by the findings of a study conducted by the author, entitled Framing of Relationships and Interests in News Coverage of British Columbia Forestry Conflicts: A Pilot Study of News as Third-Party Mediation (unpublished manuscript).
11 While there are important distinctions to be made between print and television — e.g., print’s expository potential versus the sense of immediacy and the emotional impact of television — in practice print and television journalism are much more similar than different (and are increasingly converging rather than diverging). This similarity is especially apparent when comparing the similar repertoire of frames that journalists in both media draw from — including the adversarial frame. Refer to Galin, Watching [note 4], pp. 301-2, for a insightful discussion of this phenomenon.
14 Ibid., p. 179.
16 Reference to ethical principle is not merely a naive or pious admonition to some vague notion of virtue and morality. It is a practice with very real political implications. Consider the historical struggles for social justice — women’s movements, civil rights movements, labour movements, post-colonial independence movements — that have been empowered by their determined articulation of ethical principle. Such struggles, certainly, are far from over, and setbacks have been and will continue to be experienced. Historically, however, these struggles have been greatly empowered when they have successfully maneuvered public discourse out of the quagmire of competing interest claims and into the court of ethical principle.