Understanding environmental journalism and the practices, values, and roles of environmental journalists is very much about understanding the nature of media organizations and the working conditions and pressures that influence the process of public communication about the environment. It is not surprising then that most of what we know about environmental journalism is—rightly—grounded in the larger body of work on the sociology of news. The multiple factors influencing the nature of news work, as succinctly summarized by Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese (2014) in their hierarchical model of influences, also apply to environmental news. However, there are some factors that are unique or more particularly pronounced in environmental news than in other types of news. Far from being a simple reflection of the state of the environment, news and public communication about the environment are shaped at different levels, ranging from the practices and values of individual communicators, through the technical, economic, and organizational characteristics of news media, to the wider social, political, and cultural context.

This chapter discusses how research on news values, organizational structures and arrangements in media organizations, and the professional values and working practices of journalists and other media professionals can help explain the dynamics and politics of public mediated communication about the environment. The development of an “environment beat” and of specialist environmental journalists is examined, as are the characteristics of environmental journalists, including how they deal with reporting scientific uncertainty, how they secure credibility.
Sources and strategic communication

in their reporting, and how they deploy traditional journalistic criteria such as objectivity and balance.

The chapter surveys the emerging evidence on how environmental journalism and its values and practices are affected by enhanced strategic communication approaches by key stakeholders, by media organizational change, and by the emergence of new technologically facilitated and enhanced forms of journalism and news organization. The chapter draws on and extends arguments and discussion presented in Environment, Media and Communication (Hansen, 2019), with a specific focus here on charting the evolution and transformations of environmental journalism.

The environmental news beat and environment journalists

What we now refer to as “environmental news and journalism” has a relatively short and quite turbulent history dating back only to the 1960s. While news coverage of issues pertaining to the environment goes much further back, the 1960s saw, as A. Clay Schoenfeld, Robert F. Meier, and Robert J. Griffin (1979) argue in their early landmark study, the rise of a new and more holistic and “ecological” approach to the environment, and with this, the emergence of specialist environmental news reporters and the environment as a specialist news beat.

The creation of specialist environmental news beats toward the end of the 1960s was important in terms of creating a news space for focusing on often complex environmental issues straddling traditional subject domains, such as science, health, politics, and the economy. The importance of specialist environment journalists to the amount of coverage given to environmental matters in the media is also directly reflected in the cyclical trends that characterize long-term media attention to environmental issues (Hansen, 2015). Sharon Friedman (2004), in her overview of American environmental journalism, notes that “the environmental beat has never really been stable, riding a cycle of ups and downs like an elevator. These cycles, and consequent increases or decreases in numbers of environmental reporters and their space or air time, appear to be driven by public interest and events, as well as economic conditions” (p. 177).

Charting the initial decades of American environmental journalism, Friedman (2004) describes the 1990s as the decade that environmental journalism “grew into its shoes, becoming more sophisticated with the help of the Internet and a professional organization, the Society of Environmental Journalists. The field also matured as stories changed from relatively simple event-driven pollution stories to those of far greater scope and complexity such as land use management, global warming, resource conservation, and biotechnology” (p. 176).

The points made by Friedman are also echoed in the findings from a comprehensive national study by David B. Sachsman, James Simon, and JoAnn Myer Valenti (2006) of US environment reporters. This study found that a shrinking news hole was seen as one of the top barriers to environmental reporting and a greater barrier than interference by editors. It found that “newspapers were far more likely than television stations to have a reporter covering the environment on a regular basis” (p. 98) and that “the use of environment reporters tended to increase along with the size of the 550 newspapers examined” (p. 98). It also found that “most of the environment reporters … were veteran journalists” (p. 101); that autonomy in story selection was among the top-rated factors among environment reporters; that they relied more often on local and state sources than on national sources; and that most “felt the need to remain objective, rejecting calls for advocacy or a civic-journalism approach” (p. 93).

The pressures on environmental journalism have continued unabated into the 21st century, and the nature and organization of environmental news and journalism have been transformed by rapid changes since the 1990s in the media and communications landscape. Surveying these developments, Friedman (2015) notes how media convergence, downsizing, and the rise of
the Internet and digital media technologies have caused the reduction or elimination across traditional news media of specialist environment beats and designated environmental reporters. Environmental news is thus increasingly dispersed across more mainstream news categories and covered by general rather than specialist environmental reporters, with potential implications in turn for the quality, accuracy, or investigative nature of reporting on the environment. Sachsman and Valenti (2015) confirm these trends when they cite figures from the Society of Environmental Journalists (in the USA) showing a near halving of the number of environmental newspaper reporters in the first decade of the 21st century.

While the pressures on specialist environmental journalism and particularly the decline in environmental news beats have been well documented for North America (Friedman, 2015; Sachsman & Valenti, 2015; Brainard, 2015; Gibson, 2016) and Europe (Anderson, 2014, 2017; Painter, Kristiansen, & Schäfer, 2018), it is also important to note that similar trends do not necessarily apply in the same way or to the same extent in other parts of the world. Martin Bauer et al.’s (2013) comprehensive global survey of science journalism – which tends to overlap closely with environmental journalism – indicates that the decline seen in North America and Europe has not affected Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Work on environmental journalism in China (Tong, 2015) and in Latin America (Pinto, Prada, & Tirado-Alcaraz, 2017; Takahashi, Pinto, Chavez, & Vigon, 2018) likewise indicate different trends and different types of pressures in the construction of environmental news.

Research on environmental journalism has often revolved around the notion that environmental journalism/news is “different” from other types of journalism/news, e.g. in terms of adopting a critical or advocacy stance. While journalistic and editorial sympathy towards environmental issues promoted by environmental interest groups has been documented by research (Schoenfeld, 1980; Sachsman, Simon, & Valenti, 2010; Brüggemann & Engesser, 2014), the evidence from analyses of media coverage of environmental issues essentially also confirms – at least in traditional news media – the authority-orientation characteristic that applies to news reporting in general. In environmental news coverage, authority-orientation manifests itself both in terms of referencing mainstream political/government viewpoints and positions, and in terms of reliance on recognized official sources/institutions, rather than on environmental pressure groups or other non-governmental organizations. Authority-orientation and emphasis on government positions have also been found in countries such as China (Xie, 2015) and Russia (Poberezhskaya, 2014), not surprisingly given their authoritarian political systems.

In terms of “difference” from other types of journalism, studies of environmental reporters and specialist journalists in the closely related fields of science, technology, health, and medicine have shown that environmental journalists tend to remain much longer with their specialization than other types of journalists (Hansen, 1994; Friedman, 2004; Sachsman et al., 2006). They are more likely than other journalists to have a science degree or indeed any university degree (Sachsman et al., 2010; Brüggemann & Engesser, 2014), although the journalists feel that their journalistic training is far more important to their professional work than any science training they may have (Hansen, 1994; Hargreaves & Ferguson, 2000; Sachsman & Valenti, 2015). They often have more contact with fellow environment/science journalists in competitor media than they do with colleagues in their own organization (Dunwoody, 1980). They have – and value having – a greater degree of autonomy from editorial interference than general reporters, although it is also the case that the autonomy of the environmental/science reporter varies considerably depending on the size and type of media organization (Hansen, 1994; Sachsman et al., 2006). Crucially, the degree of autonomy in environmental journalism is increasingly under pressure and being eroded by the overall changes in and pressures on the traditional media. There are far fewer environmental reporters working for traditional media today than there were at the beginning
of the century and yet, these reporters are pressured to produce more coverage to tighter deadlines and across multiple media platforms (Brainard, 2015; Sachsman & Valenti, 2015; Williams, 2015; Gibson, 2016).

While the pressures on and erosion of environmental journalism in traditional news media organizations have been well documented, there are considerable differences across different media and different parts of the world. Most significantly, there is evidence emerging of how environmental journalists, as their traditional news organization news beats come under threat or are squeezed out altogether, adapt their environmental journalism to newer forms of media and communication, such as blogging and social media. Likewise, evidence is emerging of how “digital born” news media “have appointed new specialist reporters and editors in science and the environment in recent years, who often have a background in legacy media” (Painter et al., 2018, p. 2). Digital born media have very different editorial policies than traditional media, e.g. giving high emphasis and news space to environmental issues such as climate change. Therefore, these new media tend to bring significant changes to the voices, thematic emphases, values, and perspectives that characterize environmental journalism in traditional media. Painter et al. (2018), for example, show a departure from the traditional authority-orientation and the traditional news media focus on scientific and political perspectives in climate-change reporting, and find that some digital-born news media give considerable prominence to citizen voices/civil society protests and emphasize civil society issues like climate justice and perspectives from developing countries (p. 8).

The changing source-journalist relationship

A core factor in the production of news and public mediated communication about the environment is the relationship and balance of power between journalists and their sources. This has long been recognized, dating back to the early gate-keeping studies of the 1950s, but the study of the balance of power between journalists and their sources has become increasingly important, as this has been changing in major ways during the relatively short history of environmental journalism.

In early pioneering research on environmental news reporting and source influence, Sachsman (1976) found that over half of environmental news reports originated in or drew directly on source-generated press releases and public relations efforts, and in many cases news reports amounted to little more than a minor rewriting of press releases from powerful sources.

A long tradition of studies from North America, Europe, and Australia have similarly confirmed the tendency for environmental news reporting to rely predominantly on government and “authoritative” institutions, on scientists and independent experts, rather than on non-governmental groups (NGOs) or on environmental pressure groups. More recently, and confirming the long-accepted notion that basic journalistic practices and values differ little across the globe, similar findings have begun to emerge in studies of environmental journalism in Russia (Poberezhskaya, 2014), China (Tong, 2015; Xie, 2015), India, and countries in both Latin America (Pinto et al., 2017) and Africa.

There is also important evidence that source-influence may vary significantly across different issues and/or types of news events. Ian Hargreaves, Justin Lewis, and Tammy Speers’s (2004) analysis, for example, shows pressure groups to be more prominent in media coverage of climate change than in media coverage of health and medicine. The degree of referencing of and alignment with national government policy also depends on the nature of the event or the issue being covered. Adam Shehata and David N. Hopmann (2012) found this to be much less pronounced in relation to the major international climate change conferences (COPs) than in...
relation to day-to-day reporting on climate change. And Antal Wozniak, Hartmut Wessler, and Julia Lück (2016) showed a preference in news coverage for NGO-generated visual framing of climate change conferences, while the textual framing remained firmly aligned with government and official authority perspectives.

As the nature and technologies of public mediated communication have been changing rapidly since the 1990s, the source-journalist relationships that have traditionally characterized environmental journalism have likewise transformed and become significantly more complex than that implied by the single dyad of the source-journalist label. The increasingly dynamic and converging patterns of traditional news media and new digital media forms, and the emergence of citizen journalism in environmental communication (Allan & Ewart, 2015), have significant implications for the range of voices available and accessed in environmental reporting, for the development of environmental news stories, and indeed for the operation of traditional journalistic criteria of source-selection, verification, fact-checking, balance, etc. The new media landscape thus offers vastly expanded possibilities for influencing public communication about the environment, and in this sense also provides multiple arenas for competition between key interests in society. The developments in the media and communications landscape, as Max Boykoff, Marisa McNatt, and Michael K. Goodman (2015) note, “prompt us to reassess boundaries between who constitute ‘authorized’ speakers (and who do not) in mass media as well as who are legitimate” sources or voices in environmental debate (p. 227).

A growing body of evidence shows that the balance of power in the relationship between sources and journalists has shifted increasingly in favor of sources leading to increasing amounts of source-generated pre-packaged material in both general news reporting (Davis, 2013; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008; Lloyd & Toogood, 2015) and environmental news (Friedman, 2015; Williams, 2015).

Shifting the focus of analysis from the practices of environmental journalists to the strategic and promotional communication practices of sources has helped communication researchers throw light on the significant ways in which sources can and do influence both the agenda and the nature of public debate and controversy about environmental issues. This has helped highlight the source-interest-driven, deliberate, competitive, and strategic nature of much of public environmental communication and controversy. While the concept of strategic communication – the purposeful and integrated use of communication to achieve specified goals (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017) – has long been central to corporate, government, NGO, and pressure group communication about the environment, this has taken on renewed significance with the exponential proliferation of communication modes, channels, and formats characteristic of the new digital communications environment.

Evidence has been emerging in recent decades of how the public media and communications environment is being actively influenced and manipulated through the careful communication strategies of industry and big business through front groups, think tanks, and coalitions of various sorts keen to promote particular evidence consonant with their vested political and economic interests (Miller & Dinan, 2015). In their incisive study of the rhetorical strategies of the US coal industry, Jen Schneider, Steve Schwarze, Pete Bsumek, and Jennifer Peeples (2016) demonstrate the significant use of strategic communication by the coal industry to counter attacks on coal-based fossil fuels and to re-position the image of coal in public debate as a “clean” form of energy.

Emerging evidence from research on the newer, and controversial, type of energy production through hydraulic fracturing, “fracking,” similarly points to significant resources being invested by stakeholders on all sides of the arguments to strategically influence public communication and discourse about this controversial form of fossil fuel energy extraction (Matthews & Hansen, 2018).
Research on the strategic communication practices of corporations/companies, governments, and environmental pressure groups/NGOs provides evidence on the considerable power of key sources and stakeholders to competitively influence how environmental problems and disasters are defined through public communications media and constructed in terms of causes, attribution of responsibility, and solutions. Melissa K. Merry (2014), in a comprehensive analysis of the rhetorical and campaigning strategies of environmental groups, shows the effectiveness of a “blame-casting” strategy in directing public media attention towards the responsibility of BP during the extended Gulf of Mexico oil spill from the Deepwater Horizon platform in 2010. By contrast, and focusing on BP’s strategic framing of communications about the oil-spill, Friederike Schultz, Jan Kleinnijenhuis, Dirk Oegema, Sonja Utz, and Wouter van Atteveldt (2012) – analyzing BP press releases and news articles in US and UK newspapers – show that BP successfully deployed a “decoupling strategy” to dissociate itself from responsibility for the causes of the oil spill crisis, while casting itself as the provider of solutions both to the immediate crisis and to the longer lasting restoration necessary.

In a comprehensive meta-analysis of studies of corporate and industry communications on climate change between 1990 and 2010, Inga Schlichting (2013) documents how the strategic communication practices pursued by large corporations across different countries leave a clear trace in the dominant framing of climate change in public mediated communication. This in itself testifies to the power of sources to frame public communication. The analysis shows that industry actors moved from an uncertainty frame aimed at casting doubt on and disputing the emerging scientific evidence about anthropogenic climate change to an industrial leadership frame, casting industry actors as taking responsibility and taking the lead in providing (technical) solutions to combat climate change.

Taken together, these studies confirm that the key news sources for environmental reporting have, over the history of environmental news reporting, become increasingly sophisticated and pro-active, including through deliberately strategic communication practices. Coupled with the evidence on the changing organizational and economic pressures on traditional news media, and the technologically changing nature of public communication, these studies testify to the balance of power between environmental journalists and their sources shifting significantly towards the latter.

Journalistic values and the construction of expertise/credibility

Much of what we know about environmental journalism derives from observational or interview/survey-based sociology-of-news studies focused on the values and journalistic practices of the journalists themselves. These studies have provided valuable evidence on the working practices of environmental journalists, including how they operate traditional journalistic criteria of accuracy, balance, and objectivity in their reporting, and how they deal with the scientific uncertainty and controversy that often characterize public debate about the environment. Environmental journalists (like other types of specialist journalists, e.g. science, technology, health, and medicine) command an elaborate set of journalistic routines geared towards securing the credibility and “objectivity” of their reporting (Stocking, 1999; Conrad, 1999; Sachsmn et al., 2010; Dunwoody, 2014; Engesser, 2017). These include judging the credibility of their sources on the basis of such standard clues as qualification, age, seniority, and institutional affiliation; and using principally senior or top-ranking and “known” sources. Environmental journalists actively seek to cultivate a relationship of mutual trust with their sources, and in particular with a core of regular sources, whom they use as “sounding boards” when dealing with new or “unknown” sources (Hansen, 1994). The importance, to these specialist
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journalists, of trust and the cultivation of trust in the relationship with their main sources remains a core characteristic of journalistic values (Geller, Bernhardt, Gardner, Rodgers, & Holtzman, 2005; Priest, 2015).

Journalistic strategies for maintaining the legitimacy and credibility of their reporting revolve around the core journalistic values or norms of objectivity, impartiality, accuracy, and balance. The professional values of environmental journalism dictate that reporting must be – and must be seen to be – balanced, accurate, and based in “facts” originating from credible sources (Dunwoody, 2014). The journalistic norms of objectivity and balance arose, as Sharon Dunwoody (2014) notes, as “surrogates for validity, that is, as ways of compensating for journalists’ inability to determine whether their sources’ assertions are true or not” (p. 33).

However, if the idea of balance in reporting is executed too literally, and perhaps particularly where issues are characterized by sharply divided polar opposites, it may result in news reporting greatly at odds with e.g. the prevailing scientific consensus on an issue. Research on environmental journalism and the public mediation of climate change during the 1990s and the first decade of the present century found that when environmental journalists executed the basic principle of balance the resultant effect was grossly biased relative to the scientific consensus of climate change and its causes. This brought about the label “balance as bias,” meaning that when news stories balanced their sources between the scientific consensus and the climate change naysayers, their reporting was, in fact, biased in favor of the naysayers. Often cited studies in this vein in the context of climate change are Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff (2004), Julia B. Corbett and Jessica L. Durfee (2004), and Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway (2010), but the argument has been part of the objectivity and accuracy debate much longer (Hansen, 2016).

The argument, itself, is admirably simple and elegant in its demonstration that media representations at odds with scientific consensus on an issue are a largely inadvertent result of the journalistic values of balance and objectivity. What is perhaps new is the growing body of evidence showing that traditional journalistic practices and values regarding balanced and objective reporting are being deliberately exploited by sources keen to manipulate the public communications environment to promote their particular ideological positions. This has involved strategies such as “sowing doubt” about whether climate change is happening, whether it is caused by human activity, and whether there is enough scientific evidence to take action, etc. (Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Miller & Dinan, 2015).

While “balanced” reporting – often at odds with the dominant scientific consensus – continued to be a characteristic of environmental reporting into the first decade of this century, it has also become increasingly clear from research in the last decade that this is no longer a dominant feature. In climate change reporting, environmental reporters now generally – although of course variations exist across media and across cultures – accept and reflect in their reporting the consensus view on climate change (Boykoff, 2011; Philo & Happer, 2013; Brüggemann & Engesser, 2017).

But the task of performing the traditional journalistic role of investigative, balanced, critical, and accurate reporting has become infinitely more challenging in a much-changed media and communications landscape. As Andy Williams (2015) notes, this is a news environment where fewer environmental journalists are “asked to do far more with no extra resources,” with significant negative implications for the ability to execute traditional journalistic tasks, such as fact-checking stories for accuracy, exacerbating “an already extant shift in the balance of power between reporters and their sources” (p. 202).
Frames, forums, visualization, and cultural resonance in environmental reporting

Frames, settings, and forums play a significant role in the mediated construction of expertise, credibility, and authoritativeness. This has long been recognized in other fields of news journalism (e.g. Stuart Hall, 1981, in his classic account of news photographs). However, despite the increasingly visual and image-based nature of public environmental communication, the analysis of the visual construction of expertise, credibility, and environmental debate in environmental news and journalism has only really made significant progress in the present century (Hansen, 2018).

In their comprehensive analysis of television news and the visualization of climate change, Libby Lester and Simon Cottle (2009) demonstrate how different key actors (politicians, scientists, environmental protesters, victims of climate change, etc.) are visually constructed in ways which associate very different degrees of authority, credibility, and trust with these actors. Stacy Rebich-Hespanha et al. (2015) likewise note the different visual framing of ordinary people compared with authority figures (p. 512). Ordinary people are depicted as “suffering impacts of environmental conditions or engaging in efforts to mitigate or adapt,” while authority figures are shown in active agency roles studying, reporting (scientists), or urging or opposing action (political figures and celebrities). As the authors conclude, this conveys very different visual messages about who are invested as authoritative “agents of definition” for environmental issues and, on the other hand, ordinary people whose voices are marginalized.

Research on the use of science, referencing of scientific expertise, and evidence-based argumentation in environmental reporting shows some interesting trends that may themselves be symptomatic of the changing media and communications landscape and the changing nature of public communication and debate. On the one hand, long-term analyses show what has been referred to as the “scientization” of public debate, with increasing journalistic use of scientific and expert sources, perhaps in part as a response to long-term growing public distrust in authority and experts. On the other hand, there is some evidence of a declining use of a science frame in environmental reporting (Kirilenko & Stepchenkova, 2012) and of a changing public communications environment where expert testimony and science-based evidence count for less than opinions and are less effective than referencing of deep-seated cultural myths and fears. These trends reinforce the need for analyses of environmental journalism and environmental news reporting to move well beyond text-focused analyses of how “pro-and-anti” expert testimonies or sources are “balanced” in media reporting to a multimodal analysis of how different expert testimonies are imbued with varying degrees of legitimacy and authority, or even in some cases positively undermined, by the setting, visualization, and other framings deployed by journalists.

Michael Schudson (1989), William A. Gamson (1988), and Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk (1988) have all argued for the importance of complementing the traditional sociology-of-news focus on journalistic practices and organizational arrangements with a wider view that takes into consideration how the “cultural givens” of society both facilitate and delimit journalism and news reporting. In short, for environmental issues to gain prominence in the public sphere, they must be cast in terms which resonate with existing and widely held cultural concepts (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

The extent to which the images and frames used in environmental reporting resonate with cultural themes or with emotions can be as important in effective environmental communication as the sheer frequency and repetition of images or messages. In their study of media coverage and visual agenda-setting regarding the Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster in the Gulf of
Mexico in 2010, Andrea Miller and Victoria LaPoé (2016) show that particularly emotional or resonant images, such as images of oil-soaked animals, become the most memorable even when they are not the most frequent or numerically prominent.

Studies of mediated environmental communication have demonstrated how culturally resonant interpretative packages (progress, economic prospect, ethical/moral, Pandora’s box/runaway science, nature/nurture, public accountability, etc.) are drawn upon by sources and journalists alike, and persist over time, in the communication of environmental issues (Nisbet & Newman, 2015). Such frames or packages are strategically deployed and manipulated in public environmental debate, with significant potential implications for both the nature of news representation and the mobilization of public support or protest/opposition.

**Political and economic pressures**

The influence of political and economic pressures on news organizations and the nature of news reporting is nothing new, and long predates the types of pressures often associated with the advent of new online and digital media technologies. But, as Timothy A. Gibson (2016) points out in his succinct review of research broadly in the tradition of political economy analysis of news media and organizations, environmental journalism has been particularly vulnerable to and affected by political and economic pressures on media organizations. The environmental beat and specialist environmental reporters have often been among the first to be reassigned or “laid off and forced into part-time or freelance work (Society of Environmental Journalists, 2016)” (Gibson, 2016, p. 10).

There is a growing body of research on environmental journalism and communication that shows the important linkages between media ownership, political and economic interests, and the framing and stance of environmental reporting (Boykoff & Yulsman, 2013). There is evidence for the general thesis of the political economy framework that media ownership and economic pressures on media organizations play a role in influencing the nature and political stance of reporting. Research has shown that environmental reporting in conservative news media is more likely than that of liberal or left-leaning news media to voice skepticism about climate change and to give more prominence to climate-skeptic sources (Painter & Gavin, 2016; Painter & Ashe, 2012). However, while the close relationship between the nature of environmental reporting and ownership and political outlook of news organizations is evidenced in much research, it is also becoming clear that the extent to which environmental reporting is influenced varies considerably across types of media, types of issue, and national/regional contexts.

Environmental reporting in regional or local news media has often been found to differ in terms of the range and types of voices accessed and in terms of how critical or deferential the reporting is with regard to local industries or employers in the context of environmental problems such as pollution (Dunwoody & Griffin, 1993; Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995; Cottle, 2000; Crawley, 2007).

As with other aspects of environmental news reporting, the dynamics of political and economic influences on local news and communication about the environment and environmental issues are changing in a globalized economy and in the digital and increasingly globally connected media landscape. Traditional concerns about alienating powerful employers in the local economy may be surpassed and overridden by a need for local media to voice local political disillusionment and alienation with regard to the political process, frustration with a perceived disenfranchisement with regard to decisions on controversial issues such as fracking, and local concerns about risks, pollution, and safety in the local environment. Lester and Cottle (2015) show how the dynamics of local environmental reporting are inevitably affected by the
increasingly interconnected communications environment, involving “simultaneously a politics of representation and politics of connectivity, with both necessarily involved in the scaling-up and scaling-down of local-global concerns” (p. 108).

While research has long documented the corrosive impact of economic pressures (including the decline since the 1990s of the advertising-based business model) on environmental journalists and environmental reporting in the traditional news media, evidence has only more recently started to emerge on how environmental journalism is affected by the economic and editorial models underpinning new “digital-born” news media organizations. Painter et al. (2018), in their analysis of climate change coverage in three “digital-born” news media, show how both the amount and nature of environmental coverage in these media can be understood in terms of their underlying business model and associated editorial policy (including their target audiences) and in terms of their positioning vis-à-vis legacy news media organizations. Painter et al. write:

The stand-out result was the large amount of coverage given to the summit by Huffington Post, reflecting perhaps its strong editorial focus on environmental issues, its business model based on producing a sizeable volume of content (to boost reach and attract advertising) and its desire to compete head-on with legacy media. Vice’s and BuzzFeed’s coverage was notably smaller. Both outlets were more selective in their coverage, likely driven by their desire to be different from legacy media and to publish content that would be widely shared by younger audiences on social media platforms, which shapes the type of coverage they offer.

(p. 8)

Concluding remarks

Surveying the development, trends, and changes in environmental journalism since its emergence in the 1960s, this chapter has drawn from the classic sociology of news frameworks to examine key influences on environmental journalism and the work of environmental journalists. Such influences range from the values, training, and practices of journalists, through organizational and editorial arrangements and policies (including whether news organizations have an environmental news beat staffed by specialist environmental journalists), ownership and business models of media organizations, to the wider cultural and political context of public mediated communication about the environment.

The chapter has explored the evidence on how economic pressures and technological transformations in the media and communications landscape have impacted the practices of environmental journalists and their ability to exercise traditional professional journalistic roles and norms. The changes have particularly affected the balance of power between journalists and their sources in the public communications environment. The contraction in environmental journalism in traditional news media has been matched by an expansion in sources’ use of strategic communication, resulting in an overall significant shift of power from journalists to sources in terms of ability to influence the agenda and nature of public debate about the environment. Sources have become increasingly adept at: exploiting traditional news values, norms, and practices; framing public environmental communication in culturally resonant ways; and taking advantage of the greatly enhanced affordances – including speed, visual communication, global interconnectedness, and circumvention of the traditional gate-keeping roles of news media organizations – of the digital and online communications media.

While the contraction of environmental journalism and greatly enhanced pressures on environmental journalists in traditional news media had been well documented by environmental
communication research, evidence has more recently started to emerge on how environmental journalism is affected by the economic and editorial models underpinning new “digital-born” news media organizations. Exciting indications from emerging research on environmental journalism in these types of news organizations indicate significant changes, relative to the characteristics of environmental journalism in traditional or legacy news media, such as a greater voice given to non-authority figures and a greater emphasis to themes and perspectives traditionally under-represented in conventional media.

As we have seen, the development, extent, nature, and changes of environmental journalism in traditional media has been extensively mapped and researched, and much is known about the multiple factors (journalistic, organizational, social, and cultural) influencing the nature of public mediated communication about the environment. While much of this applies to traditional or legacy news media, rather less is known about how environmental communication is affected by the rapidly changing communications environment in which traditional news media converge with online news media, social media, user-generated content, citizen journalism, etc. The changing nature of media and communications also brings with it new and changed forms of argumentation in the public sphere, and, as I argue elsewhere (Hansen, 2019), a need to reassess some of the classic questions in environmental journalism about the construction of credibility and expertise; the use of science-focused and evidence-based argumentation; trust, authority, and uncertainty; and rhetorical style in public debate.

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