En la última década, la periodización de la asignatura de ambiente y cambio climático ha experimentado una serie de cambios significativos. Estos cambios han reflejado el creciente interés de los medios de comunicación y la sociedad en temas ambientales y de cambio climático, así como el aumento de conflictos sociales y ambientales en la región. En este capítulo, se examinan los cambios recientes en la periodización de ambiente y cambio climático en América Latina, así como las razones detrás de ellos. Se realizan entrevistas con periodistas líderes de Argentina, Perú, Colombia, Costa Rica, Brasil y Bolivia para obtener sus opiniones sobre el estado actual del periodismo ambiental, los desafíos restantes y el futuro a la vista.

La región se considera uno de los lugares más peligrosos en el mundo para ambientalistas y defensores de los derechos humanos. Cada año, se clasifica en el primer lugar en el número de campañeros asesinados por luchar contra una represa, perforación de petróleo o proyectos de minería (Raftopoulos, 2017). La región ha experimentado un aumento en la perforación y la minería, lo que ha atraído inversiones extranjeras. Estos proyectos, en muchos casos realizados por corporaciones transnacionales, requieren grandes cantidades de tierra, agua y electricidad, lo que ha desafiado a las comunidades locales, que usualmente no fueron consultadas antes del desarrollo de los proyectos (Villarroel, 2006; Rasch, 2017).

Los recursos naturales han convertido a la economía de la mayoría de los países latinoamericanos, quienes dependen de la extracción de recursos para una gran parte de su PIB (Sinnott, Nash, & de la Torre, 2010). Mientras que la abundancia de minerales, hidrocarburos y bosques ha aumentado la productividad de muchos países, ha llevado a la deforestación y la erosión de los suelos, lo que ha desafiado a las comunidades locales a adaptarse a estos cambios.
people out of poverty, this regional wealth has led to numerous violent conflicts in what has been described as the “resource curse.” These prolific natural resources have had perverse effects on the political, social, and economic development of many Latin American countries (Ross, 2014).

These violent conflicts shook many newsrooms, which generally neglected environmental issues, running only small articles that were not even published on a daily basis. Media outlets, mainly newspapers and magazines, started receiving calls and letters over growing tensions on extractive activities, which could not be ignored. A small but active group of reporters began pressuring their editors to increase environmental coverage. Many media underwent a fundamental paradigm shift as they began reporting on issues that two decades before would never have reached the front page of a Latin American news outlet.

“When I started at the newspaper 14 years ago, there was almost no environmental reporting, a similar scenario shared with the rest of the media outlets in the country. But as extractive activities expanded, more conflicts appeared and stories regarding them gained strength. At first, I thought it was something local but later I realized its magnitude,” said Pablo Correa, an environmental editor from Colombia with a long career at El Espectador, the country’s oldest newspaper.

Correa, who is also a freelancer for SciDev and InfoAmazonia (and former MIT Knight Science Journalism Center fellow), said media outlets in the country “were forced” to give a larger role to environmental issues because of the growing pressure from society. “The dynamic of the country and the region was starting to change, and we had to keep its pace. Media outlets matured, and journalists got more empowered,” he said, claiming that with the rising environmental conflicts a wide array of environmental issues started to gain strength, such as biodiversity, national parks, and flora and fauna.

Laura Rocha, a freelance environmental reporter from Argentina now working for the news website Infobae, agreed with Correa that when looking back the “number of stories published is now larger” and that editors are “starting to understand the role environmental issues should have.” Stories regarding extractive industries always rank high, she said, followed by deforestation, climate change, and conflicts as a whole. “Journalists started to understand that the stories have to be told differently and less technically if we wanted to reach a larger audience,” she added.

Media outlets in Latin America moved from having a limited perspective on environmental issues, mainly considering them colorful and soft-core stories, to having a wider understanding and giving them a larger role, according to Katiana Murillo, a freelance environmental journalist from Costa Rica and the founder of the initiative LatinClima. “When you talked to an editor about an environmental story, they only pictured birds and pretty animals. As time passed, coverage increased, and editors got a wider sense on what the environment meant. Costa Rica is a leading country in environmental issues, so it made no sense not to give them a larger role in our media outlets,” she said.

However, the fact that most of the news stories were linked to conflicts led to the perception that environmental news always concerned negative issues. Media outlets have generally not featured in-depth articles into the reasons for the social and environmental tensions, thus encouraging an attitude of indifference or passivity in their readers and not fully educating them on environmental issues (Nuñez & Moreno, 2016). At the same time, the large number of ongoing conflicts in the region exceeded the capacity of many media outlets, with no reporters specifically assigned to environmental reporting in most cases. This led to a lack of regularity when reporting on the environment, linked to crisis and chaotic situations (González Cruz, 2007).

“Environmental issues in the media are on the rise, but there’s a clear bias. Reporting on the environment means focusing on a negative and denunciation journalism. More than 90 percent
of the stories are done that way. We have to start talking about the positive things, actions done by individuals, the private sector, and institutions,” said Pilar Celi Frias, a Peruvian environmental reporter working for the specialized website ConexiónCOP. “It’s still not common to see environmental news every day in the media. Not all editors acknowledge the role these issues should have.”

For Damián Profeta, an Argentine journalism professor and environmental reporter at the initiative Claves21, there is a growing awareness in Latin American media outlets regarding the importance of environmental issues, with more understanding editors. Nevertheless, there is a long way to go for environmental coverage. “It is still superficial and a long way from an ideal situation. Environmental conflicts always rank high on the type of issues reported, alongside climate change, which is clearly on the rise. Most of the issues are linked to the economy, such as discussing clean and sustainable transportation because of the expansion of Latin American cities,” Profeta said.

Meanwhile, Gustavo Faleiros, a Brazilian environmental reporter, believes that there is high quality content, but not enough is published. “Extractive and large infrastructure projects are always a large part of the agenda on environmental reporting. Other issues include pollution, agrochemicals, and land conflicts.”

However, most of the media analysis of environmental issues covered by Latin American outlets now focuses on climate change. Kitzberger and Pérez (2009) reviewed climate change reporting in seven Latin American countries and concluded that there was no profound discussion on the issue, with a larger international focus in Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela and a more local one in Bolivia and Peru.

Meanwhile, González Alcaraz (2012), reviewing Argentine dailies, found that coverage of climate change increases steeply when international events occur, such as the UN Conference of the Parties (COP) climate summits. Most of the sources mentioned in the stories reviewed were international, overwhelming local voices. The lack of a local perspective was also highlighted in research by Mercado (2013) on the Argentine daily Clarín, which focused on an international angle when reporting on climate change, with most of the stories linked to global summits and international reports. At the same time, media outlets in the region were found to portray climate change as an issue that only concerns scientists, experts, governments, and NGOs, far away from the people. When included in the stories, citizens were seen as either victims of climate change or saviors of the planet (Mercado & Galarza, 2017).

**Limited numbers, large efforts**

Despite the larger role given to environmental news in the region, specialized reporters still face a limitation that they agree will take a long time to change. No matter the country, across Latin America the number of journalists reporting on the environment is still very low, thereby limiting environmental coverage. There are only a handful of specialized environmental journalists in each of the countries in the region. The quality and extent of the news coverage is often linked to their individual efforts and perseverance, as they usually have to convince their editors to give them sufficient space. Most of these environmental specialists work for digital and print publications, limiting environmental journalism outside these formats.

In Bolivia, there are only four reporters exclusively covering environmental news, according to Mónica Oblitas, a Bolivian freelance environmental reporter who is one of the four and has 20 years of experience. “We are a small group that works closely, trying to sell our stories wherever we can. We have a better reception in foreign media outlets than local ones, which usually do not care about these issues or do not give them a large role. There are a lot of barriers,
and you end up frustrated and working only with specialized media outlets that understand the importance of these issues,” she said.

Meanwhile, in Peru, Celi Frias said there are no more than 10 reporters working on environmental issues. “It all relies on the individual interest of the reporter, as editors are not supportive. It is a reduced group, and we find it difficult to have a daily space for our stories,” she said. Rocha agrees, saying that the number of environmental reporters in Argentina and Latin America in general “is not enough,” and that the possibility of being a specialized environmental reporter depends on “individual willingness and encouragement,” as there is almost no support from the editors of media outlets to encourage their reporters to work on environmental issues.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that universities teaching journalism in Latin America usually do not include courses related to environmental reporting. Young reporters are only trained on traditional issues such as politics and economics, not giving them the possibility of making a career in environmental reporting (Quintas, García, Muñoz, & Sorhuet, 2010). But such curricula does not match a growing interest of both new and professional reporters who are eager to learn more regarding how to report on environmental issues.

According to Profeta, “There is a large interest of reporters on understanding and being informed regarding the environment, which is something new that wasn’t so clear before.” Correa has noticed the same at El Espectador in Colombia, where young reporters arrive asking to work specifically on the environmental section. “The newspaper became a kind of school on environmental journalism, filling the gap of the universities. Some of the best environmental reporters started here and then developed great careers. Universities are lagging behind in their training. There are no options of formal studies on environmental journalism,” he said.

For Oblitas, the situation is even worse for mid-career journalists who are already finished with their education and cannot find where to train on the environment. Some of the few formal education spaces for environmental journalism in Latin America can be found in Argentina, specifically in the cities of La Plata and Rosario. In both cities, the public universities carry out postgraduate courses. Since 2006, the National University of Rosario has had a one-year course on environmental communication with practical and theoretical content. La Plata National University holds a one-year course on communication and environment, also with practical and theoretical content. Both require students to already have a bachelor’s degree in communications and are broader than just focusing on journalism, also welcoming, for example, the communication managers of NGOs. In Bolivia, Oblitas was recently asked to organize a postgraduate course on environmental journalism, which will further add to the list of options. The scenario is bleaker when looking at the undergraduate programs on journalism, as most do not include courses related to the environment (Garivati, 2016).

An increasing number of web tools have also opened the door for online courses on environmental journalism. Nevertheless, most of the available options are only for English-speaking reporters, a limiting factor for the journalists of the region. Seeking to change that, Claves21, a network of environmental reporters in Latin America, started working in 2016 with the Earth Journalism Network (EJN), a global network of environmental reporters, to develop online courses specifically designed for Spanish-speaking reporters from Latin America. Claves21 first developed a massive open online course (MOOC) on climate change, open to all and free thanks to funding granted by EJN. The course included four modules ranging from climate science to digital tools that can be used to report on climate change, as well as live webinars with experts and multiple opportunities for the students to practice journalism skills. More than 1,500 reporters from the region took the first course in 2016, which continues to be held for free on a regular basis, usually prior to every COP climate change conference.
Following that initial training, Claves21 developed a second free course in 2018, also with EJN support, but now focused on biodiversity, including modules regarding the basic science behind biodiversity and tools to report it. Live webinars were also held as part of the MOOC with experts across the region. More than 600 reporters took part in the first course, all of whom were thankful for such opportunities in Latin America, based on their comments at the course’s forum. “The fact that so many people joined the course and participated actively showed there is a large interest by reporters from Latin America to receive training on environmental reporting. But this interest has to be followed with more opportunities for reporters,” said Profeta, one of the cofounders of Claves21. The group hopes to continue developing similar opportunities for journalists in the region.

A similar effort in Latin America was carried out in 2015 and 2016 by a set of local news organizations, including LatinClima, ConexiónCOP, and El Árbol América Latina. They worked together with global organizations such as EJN, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and the Latin-American Social Ecology Center (CLAES). They carried out an online training program on climate change for Latin American reporters, which mainly consisted of a set of online interviews with experts across the region. Twenty reporters from 10 countries participated in the first five training sessions in 2015, discussing issues such as the Paris Agreement, the role of forests for climate change, and the phasing out of fossil fuels. The training was then repeated in 2016 with another 17 reporters, chosen from 100 applicants. More than 80% of the journalists who participated in the activity said it helped them to better understand the challenges of climate change, providing them with valuable knowledge to apply in the newsroom on a daily basis. The interviews that were part of the training also led to many stories later being published based on the statements given by the experts.

A few workshops have also been carried out in the last few years to bring environmental journalists together, share experiences, and train on specific issues. The Colombian-based Foundation for New Journalism (FNPI) has carried out a few workshops across the region over the last decade, mainly for mid-career reporters. In 2007, EFE Spanish agency reporter Arturo Larena gave a one-week course on environmental journalism in Colombia organized by FNPI. In 2016 they also held a three-day workshop on climate change in Argentina. At the same time, EJN has been active in the region. For example, in 2016 they carried out a one-week training program for environmental reporters in Costa Rica, and in 2015 they held a three-day workshop on oceans in Chile. Many environmental reporters from the region have been selected as fellows by EJN to attend international conferences related to climate change, biodiversity, and other issues. Every year EJN carries out the Climate Change Media Partnership (CCMP), which brings environmental reporters from across the world to the COP climate change summits.

The time for entrepreneurs

The larger role for environmental journalism comes at the time of a large crisis in traditional media outlets across the world, to which Latin America is no exception. Many new and old media outlets in the region have closed their doors over the last few years, such as the Buenos Aires Herald, an English-written daily that closed after 140 years. Those who remain open have been shrinking severely, with either layoffs or early retirement schemes, paying their reporters to leave the newsroom earlier than expected. Surprisingly, many have accepted these proposals, such as Rocha in Argentina, who left La Nación, one of the most important newspapers in the country, after a long career focusing on environmental issues. This crisis in the economic viability of media outlets has resulted in significant challenges for environmental journalism. Large media outlets are left without specialized reporters, leaving the coverage to others who
may not have the specific knowledge or training to properly report on the environment. At the same time, in the rush towards getting more visits on their sites, digital media have relied more on soft-core news such as show business rather than environmental reporting (Natanson, 2014).

The highly concentrated media landscape in Latin America makes it even more challenging. Media outlets in the region are generally commercial in nature, subject to only very lax regulations from national and local governments. The Latin American media scene tends towards oligopoly – most of the newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels are concentrated in a few hands. This has led to homogeneity on the editorial line. These media groups have seen a larger increase in their power and concentration during the last few decades thanks to economic support from the state and the lack of government regulations (Becerra, 2014).

Most media outlets are located in the main urban centers of the countries of the region, which leads to many issues and voices being neglected. They are no longer family businesses but instead large conglomerates, in many cases tied to transnational corporations such as Prisa and Telefónica. This market concentration has had a negative effect on the number of jobs available and on working conditions, which have worsened in the region (FIP, 2016).

“Newsrooms are getting smaller in Latin America, with many reporters starting either by freelancing or working on something else,” said Profeta, who used to work for the daily El Argentino, which has closed its doors. “There are a lot of people getting their degrees in journalism every year, but there is not sufficient room for all of them in the mass media outlets. Environmental issues are far from being the priority in this context, with mass media more focused on entertainment news. The environment is rarely a trending topic in social media.”

For Murillo, who worked for the newspapers El Financiero and La Nación, such a crisis means “it is one of the worst moments to be a specialized reporter, as you have to take all sorts of jobs to survive.” She believes that the specialization in environmental reporting is being “left aside” as a consequence of the media crisis.

The bleak scenario across the newsrooms has led to many environmental reporters becoming freelancers and starting to pitch stories to local and foreign media outlets. Rocha now regularly publishes on the website Infobae, and Oblitas works with a wide array of specialized media outlets. At the same time, frustrated with the lack of opportunities for environmental reporters, a group of specialized journalists started their own independent projects. They did this in order to have their own place to publish that was not dependent on the willingness of an editor and also to allow environmental journalism to grow in Latin America. Such has been the case of Claves21, Conexión COP, La Mula Verde, Conexión Coral, LatinClima, Periodistas por el Planeta, and InfoAmazonia, among others.

Profeta, funded by the Earth Journalism Network, cofounded Claves21 in Argentina in 2013, aiming to connect environmental reporters and journalism students in a regional network. The project works as a news website and a place to go when looking for opportunities for environmental journalism. Every year, Claves21 hands out awards in cash for the best environmental stories in the region, along with providing training through its online courses. “We believed there was room to start a low-cost news project that over time could become sustainable, obtaining funding from organizations that supported environmental reporting. Since then, we have only grown,” said Profeta.

Also seeking to connect environmental reporters, in Costa Rica, LatinClima has seen significant growth. The project was started by Murillo in 2015 with funding from the German Development Agency (GIZ) and in partnership with local ministries and scientific organizations. Its main aim is to increase coverage of climate change in the Latin American media landscape and to provide opportunities for reporters with online courses and workshops. “We wanted to create a community of reporters working with climate change in the region, a network not only of
Environmental journalism in Latin America

information but also of training done by reporters for reporters,” said Murillo, who reported that
the network already has more than 300 members. LatinClima expects to continue growing and
is already planning a set of activities for the next few years through new funding obtained from
the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation for Development (AECID).

Meanwhile, in Peru and focused on climate change, ConexiónCOP works as a news website
specifically designed for reporters to obtain useful information that they can then freely use in
their stories. The project started in 2014, thanks to funding obtained from the European Union.
The website includes not only stories but also key documents, photos, infographics, and all sorts
of other training materials. “There was not that much information on climate change available
in Latin America, and since the COP was going to be held here we thought the project was a
good opportunity. It quickly became a key source for Latin American reporters, and we decided
to keep it going,” Celi Frias, a member of the team, said, explaining that ConexiónCOP is now
working based on funding obtained from a set of organizations.

Also in Peru, La Mula is an independent news organization that has grown significantly
since its start in 2009. The project groups a wide community of blogs, among which is La
Mula Verde, specifically reporting on environmental news. The segment is managed by Alberto
Ñiquen Guerra, an award-winning mid-career journalist.

A more recent project, and also a news website, Conexión Coral was founded in 2016 in
Argentina by environmental reporters Tais Gadea Lara and Rafael Otegui, both environmen-
tal freelance reporters. The website, funded through online ads and partnerships, covers issues
such as climate change, sustainability, gender, and oceans, working with three interns. In Brazil,
environmental reporter Gustavo Faleiros started InfoAmazonia in 2008, a digital map that uses
satellite and other publicly available data to monitor the Amazon rainforest. InfoAmazonia uses a
network of organizations and journalists to deliver updates from the nine countries of the forest.
The project has expanded to similar geojournalism initiatives in other parts of the world, such
as CartoChaco, which uses data to reveal natural resource exploitation in the Chaco plain of
Bolivia, InfoCongo, which is focused on central Africa, and InfoAmazonia Colombia, working
in that country. InfoAmazonia also signed partnerships to work with media outlets in the region
such as El Espectador in Colombia, with a reporter working for both for the newspaper and for
InfoAmazonia Colombia. “The project started with a broader approach, but we soon realized
that our focus had to be data journalism. That helped us to attract funding and be more focused.
We have had a good reputation over the years,” said Faleiros.

Finally, Argentinian environmental reporters Marina Aizen, Laura Rocha, Alba Priotto, and
Pilar Assefh started Periodistas por el Planeta in 2015. This non-governmental organization seeks
to provide support for specialized reporters while also encouraging more environmental news
being reported across Latin America. The NGO recently obtained its formal legal recognition
and is planning a set of activities to work with reporters during the upcoming years. “We are
not environmental campaigners, but we want the environment to be reported more and better.
We want to bring funds into the region in order to train and support reporters interested in
environmental issues. If we are able to get more people reporting and speaking regarding the
environment, our objective would have been met,” Rocha said.

Future outlook

Environmental journalism has undergone major changes in Latin America. It went from being
an almost non-existent beat with only a few reporters to expanding into an established speciali-
zation of Latin American media, partly because of the pressures on the region’s natural resources.
But there is still a long way to go. The number of environmental reporters is still low, universities
don’t take the specialization seriously, and the coverage is mainly done in magazines, newspapers, and websites, while excluding radio and TV stations.

For Murillo, it’s all about specialization. “If the reporters’ training doesn’t change, we’ll be stuck in the same place for a long time. Media outlets have to listen to their audience and realize that environmental issues can be a hit if they sell them well. The landscape has changed, but it’s still not enough for a radical change regarding environmental journalism,” she said. In Argentina, Rocha is on the same line and considers that specializing is the way forward. “The way media outlets work is changing, and they will start looking more at freelance specialized reporters. But the only way to produce quality content is to receive proper training because of the complexity of the environmental issues.”

Meanwhile, Profeta takes the issue even broader and questions the way of thinking of editors, who have difficulties realizing the potential of environmental issues. “Environmental journalism is one of the number of specializations possible in journalism. But not everybody gets that yet, so we have to keep insisting. Now most reporters get trained on the environment just by working, but we should work on creating more formal training opportunities. Journalists in the region have to realize that environmental journalism is a valuable professional opportunity.”

For Correa, the environment will be the news story of the future. He asks TV and radio to widen their coverage and asks universities to improve their training of reporters. “Nothing will be able to compete with environmental news in the future. The environmental crisis we are seeing will lead to big changes in policies and international agreements. Media outlets in Latin America will have to keep up with the pace and start following that agenda.” Because of shrinking newsrooms, a large part of environmental reporting in the future will likely be played by the numerous independent projects in the region. But they also may be subject to change. “Many journalists are starting their own initiatives, and that’s highly valuable. But there will be projects that will continue and others that will fade away. It will be a natural selection of all of them. Funding is always the main limitation,” said Faleiros, who remained optimistic regarding the overall future of the specialization. “Quality and quantity will be better. There’s a growing demand for environmental news.”

References


