

Standards for Covering Environmental Issues and Related Challenges in Regional Media

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Abstract

The state of covering environmental issues in Georgian media is unfavorable. The number of published topics in the ecological sphere is limited, and the content that does appear does not aim at a deep understanding of the issues. Media outlets typically confine themselves to providing short news updates, which hinders the search for solutions to the ongoing environmental crises.

The aim of the present paper is to examine the standards of environmental coverage and to analyze the work of regional media in the field of environmental reporting, as well as to identify the problems associated with it. Among the diverse media landscape in Georgia, online media outlets were selected as the objects of study, as they play a decisive role in raising public awareness and disseminating scientific knowledge in the digital era, particularly against the backdrop of environmental crises. The research examines four online media outlets operating in Western Georgia and analyses the share of environmental topics within their overall media output. Based on content analysis, the forms and structure of information delivery were identified. Relying on criteria recognized in the scientific field, the study highlights important results and their implications. Consequently, international practices and the perspectives of scholars specializing in environmental journalism are taken into account.

Drawing on the available scientific knowledge on environmental media coverage, the paper introduces several new insights intended to promote both deeper public awareness and the activation of preventive functions. The main finding is of a recommendatory nature: the current trend of environmental reporting requires revision, which

implies a shift in media emphasis from news-style coverage of the adverse impacts of climate change toward the production of analytical material.

Keywords: *Environmental Coverage; Media Standards; Environmental Issues; Ecological Awareness; Regional Online Media.*

Introduction

The digital era of the past three decades has generated excessive demand for natural resources and exacerbated environmental problems. Uncontrolled human interference in nature has led society to catastrophes such as climate change, earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters. In the reality we live in today, major environmental risks—large-scale natural cataclysms, changes in land structure, air pollution, and water quality—have become part of our everyday life. Owing to digital technologies, such information reaches us instantly on a global scale.

In these circumstances, media plays an essential role. It is capable of identifying, processing, and disseminating information necessary for the functioning of nature, society, and critical thinking. Of particular importance is the dissemination of scientific knowledge and the active involvement of researchers in various media outlets. Scientific journalism, as a specialized field, helps audiences, form a scientific worldview. Media texts enriched with scientific argumentation provide an effective pathway for analyzing various spheres of public life. From this perspective, the role of specialized media is extremely significant.

Among the many scientific challenges, the interpretation and understanding of climate and environmental issues by the media is especially vital today. Through heightened coverage of environmental topics, society receives essential information and value-based propositions that help construct a scientific picture of the world. At the same time, by reporting on climate and environmental issues, the media influences both individual and collective consciousness and attitudes. Enhancing ecological awareness is directly connected to behavioral change.

It is equally important to note that climate change is one of the most difficult topics to discuss—more complex than conversations about sex, drugs, or religion; on par with the difficulty of discussing death or depression¹. Yet environmental topics are precisely those areas through which local media can rapidly build trust among their audiences. A prevailing assumption in Georgia is that the public is uninterested in climate change and its consequences, as daily social, economic, and political challenges leave little room for concern. However, research paints a different picture: 60% of Georgia’s population considers climate change one of the most significant global challenges, and 91% believe that it poses a real threat to humankind. Thus, the public is far more interested in climate-related developments than urban myths would suggest. Moreover, according to the same study, 64.7% of respondents believe they can contribute to mitigating climate-related risks through changes in behavior or lifestyle. When the media discusses climate-related natural disasters and their fatal consequences, significant scientific findings, and progress achieved in other societies, as well as political trends and issues, it will inevitably find an audience.²

Online Media as an Environmental Communicat

Among contemporary communication tools, online media has become one of the most effective global resources for obtaining information about climate change, environmental protection, and sustainable lifestyles, owing to the reach and accessibility of the internet. Unlike traditional media, the internet is more frequently used to raise environmental awareness because it enables immediate public reaction and participation. Notably, the number of young people actively using new media platforms is increasing. However, the format is not limited to youth—social media platforms are also used by

¹ Rebecca Huntley, *How to Talk About Climate Change in a Way That Makes a Difference* (Crows Nest and London: Murdoch Books, 2020)

² What Georgians know about climate change. 2020
<https://www.undp.org/georgia/publications/what-georgians-know-about-climate-change-2020>

industry actors and governmental bodies as tools for communication with the public.³

Traditionally, the media was perceived as an institution that supports social issues, influences politics, and initiates behavioral change. In the modern world, however, its “research domain” has expanded to reflect social life on a broader scale—presenting culture, politics, and social processes in depth and generating public interest in global issues. Among these global issues are environmental protection, the dissemination of scientific knowledge, and the enhancement of environmental awareness.

Online media plays an especially significant role during ecological crises and major natural disasters (such as earthquakes and floods), when timely, accurate, and content-rich information carries immense value. In the context of climate change, the media traditionally performs three main functions: watchdog, advocate for social issues, and—most importantly—informer of the public. Informing the audience does not merely mean presenting facts; it also requires the effort to disseminate relevant information, place it within an appropriate framework, and make it engaging and meaningful for the audience.⁴

Unlike traditional media, online media has extensive communicative capacities and serves as a suitable platform for conveying social, political, and economic developments in the country. Its technological advantages allow uninterrupted, instant information dissemination, engagement of a wide audience, and the rapid elevation of public awareness. Due to this capacity for intensive coverage, online media acts as a catalyst, drawing broad public attention to critical issues and quickly shaping attitudes. By using modern communication techniques, it motivates audiences to reflect on environmental problems and risks. Digital technologies and social networks serve as

³ Jharotia, A. Role of media in enhancement of environmental awareness. Conference: Power of Media: Shaping the Future, At Tacna Auditorium, 2018

⁴ Aparna Mishra, THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS: AN OVERVIEW, International Journal of Education, Modern Management, Applied Science & Social Science (IJEMMASSS), 2021, pp.171-176

effective tools for raising awareness about sustainable development goals—an issue crucial for the future.⁵

Environmental Media Standards and Review of Climate Science Research

The formation of environmental awareness, which depends on the effective action of media, is impossible without adherence to certain rules. Behavioral transformation occurs when the media develops environmental material in line with essential standards. This practice already exists in the developed world, and its adoption should be in the interest of every media organization. If media fail to produce standards-based environmental content, an uninformed society—facing increasing ecological crises—will remain vulnerable and unable to plan preventive measures. The fact that many adults feel hopeless about the future is directly linked to natural disasters. Such psychological states among the healthy segment of society are alarming and constitute a serious problem of contemporary life.⁶

It is crucial to understand best practices employed by leading international media outlets in covering environmental topics—how they interpret and assess environmental issues, set goals, and employ persuasive strategies to shape environmental awareness. This knowledge helps other media institutions develop a vision of what, why, and how to cover environmental topics in order to change existing approaches and attitudes towards ecology and specific environmental challenges facing modern societies.

Most scientists define climate change as a critical issue. Climate-science research is diverse and focused on various aspects of the subject. Western practice often examines media standards for covering environmental themes, contributing to the development of theoretical frameworks. As a result, certain rules and guidelines

⁵Rebecca Huntley, *How to Talk About Climate Change in a Way That Makes a Difference* (Crows Nest and London: Murdoch Books, 2020)

⁶Jharotia, A. Role of media in enhancement of environmental awareness. Conference: Power of Media: Shaping the Future, At Tacna Auditorium, 2018

emerge, based on which journalists must search for, investigate, document, and explain climate and environmental issues.

One relevant study in this regard is by Vinit Kaul, who analyses environmental crises and the role of the media. According to Kaul, the low level of environmental coverage is caused by journalists' limited knowledge of ecological issues, which discourages them from writing or reporting on such topics. The researcher is also critical of current media trends that focus exclusively on the negative impacts of climate change rather than discussing potential solutions. The article highlights a key recommendation: the scarcity of clear and accurate environmental information in the media must be remedied through universally applied practices for climate reporting.⁷

The first and most essential step in overcoming this challenge is activating the media's educational function, one of its core responsibilities. Such content not only mobilizes audience attention but prepares the public to comprehend, deeper socio-political information. Through its educational role, the media has the ability to disseminate comprehensive knowledge on environmental issues.

Of no lesser significance is the production and dissemination of formats such as "environmental shows." When media outlets use this genre to provide timely and substantive coverage of ecological crises, the programmer acquires mass appeal and offers the public the expert opinions of several competent individuals—an invaluable resource.

Interactivity is inherently a key element of communication processes. Media can use this advantage effectively. The organization of "public debates" on potential environmental problems offers citizens a platform to express their views and concerns. Whereas studio platforms are usually reserved for well-known or highly competent individuals, interactive formats allow ordinary citizens—who have fewer opportunities—to have their voices heard, which is vital for public engagement. Initiating public debates yields dual benefits:

⁷ Veneer Kayli, Environmental Crisis and the Role of Media, International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development, Volume 1(4), ISSN: 2456-6470 www.ijtsrd.com, May-Jun 2017

increased citizen participation in media platforms and heightened accountability of those responsible for environmental issues.

The media also has the capacity to perform preventive functions through publicizing individuals who pollute the environment, harm vital spaces, or pose risks, while simultaneously warning citizens about the dangers of pollution. The purpose of such activity is to stimulate critical thinking and guide social processes in a constructive direction. When citizens reflect critically on environmental issues—understanding the damage to ecological balance and the severity of potential risks—the media acts as a catalyst.

Naturally, producing balanced content is a core requirement for the media. This is equally crucial in environmental reporting, as it allows diverse perspectives and opinions to surface. Specialized programs within media organizations offer an efficient avenue for achieving change on a national level. By producing balanced content, the media can exert substantial pressure on actual and potential polluters and influence political actors responsible for environmental governance. This capability must be fully utilized.

Researcher MA Dahlan, in his article “Expanding the Role of Media in Environmental Protection,” discusses, how media functions have changed over time in relation to environmental coverage. Written nearly thirty years ago, the article is noteworthy because it addresses developments in Western media at the time that remain relevant today. Specifically, the shift from focusing on dramatic natural disasters to broader coverage of human-induced environmental issues—such as pollution and misuse of natural resources—mirrors process visible in Georgian media today. This trend serves as a valuable example of how local media should focus on environmental problems. Dahlan concludes that the media must go beyond being a passive observer and instead encourage public participation and socialization in fulfilling environmental norms. His recommendation emphasizes the need for the media to introduce innovations in reporting environmental threats to help the public better understand natural, artificial, and social environments.

We do not assume that Georgian media can uniformly adopt Western practices, as environmental reporting varies across local, regional, and global media landscapes. Media outlets differ in how they perform their functions, shaped by levels of national development and financial resources. Large media organizations can afford specialized environmental and climate reporters, advanced technologies, and high-quality content. By contrast, lower- and middle-income countries often assign general-topic reporters to cover environmental issues—work that inherently requires specialized knowledge. Content prepared without such expertise is inevitably less effective. Moreover, media outlets may cover climate and environmental issues only as part of their main news agenda. Limited financial and human resources, political instability, and censorship further impede high-quality coverage. As a result, the public becomes critical of media outlets that fail to deliver adequate reporting. Journalists' access to climate-related data, technology, and high-quality production depends on financial resources, political stability, and adherence to journalistic standards.⁸

In Georgia, major obstacles to environmental and climate reporting are described in detail in the study “Assessment of the Capacities, Gaps, and Needs of Georgian Media to Improve Climate and Environmental Reporting” conducted by NNLE Climate Basics for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD). The findings reveal several key impediments to producing high-quality environmental content. For the purpose of comparison, we highlight a few: mainstream Georgian media shows limited or no interest in covering climate change and environmental issues; environmental reporting is considered relatively unpopular; most coverage focuses on natural disasters or isolated international events; journalists lack adequate training in processing climate-related data; and for many, climate change remains a relatively new topic, with some struggling to recognize its specific effects on Georgian reality.⁹

⁸ M. Allawi Dahl an, EXPANDING THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION*, Media Asia, 1994•Taylor & Francis

⁹ Capacity Assessment Report and Strategic Plan for Enhancing Media Knowledge, 2022

Research Methodology

The recent rise in public interest toward climate issues has largely been influenced by the accessibility of social media. Growing climate-related disasters and public anxiety are clearly reflected in social media analytics. However, since social networks also facilitate the spread of misinformation, the role of news agencies—key media actors with large audiences—becomes even more important.

Based on the needs and growing functions of news agencies, the general research problem was identified: examining how regional online media outlets cover environmental issues. Since environmental problems transcend national boundaries, several research questions emerged from this overarching issue:

- To what extent are regional online news agencies interested in climate change and environmental issues?
- What type of content do they produce?
- What scientific knowledge do they disseminate on these topics?
- Do they use interactive formats?
- What contribution do they make to the national environmental media landscape?

For this study, four highly ranked online media outlets operating in Western Georgia were selected: „**Kutaisi post**“, „**Inf. imereti**“, „**First News**“, and „**Top-News**“. Based on preliminary exploration of the field, a sufficiently lengthy timeframe was chosen in order to identify pre-established trends. Synthetic content analysis was used as the research method. As criteria, characteristics extracted from Western online media practices were applied—such as methods of disseminating environmental information, the frequency and scale of environmental coverage, and their contribution to sustainable education and environmental awareness. These criteria allowed us to assess the extent of each outlet’s interest in environmental topics and to develop recommendations.

Observation of the environmental material published by these four outlets shows that among them, „**Kutaisi post**“ provides the most

extensive coverage of ecological topics—although primarily in the form of short informational updates. Analytical articles explaining the causes of the climate crisis appear only rarely.

The analysis revealed that this outlet, like others, prioritizes political, economic, and social issues. Environmental topics appear only occasionally and are discussed alongside the country's most pressing problems. For example, „**Kutaisi post**“ included a news item about the Governor of Imereti's participation in the Eco Forum Guiyang in China. It also contains information related to air and soil pollution, renewable energy resources, and the “ecological genocide” in several villages of Chiatura. Additionally, the media covered a protest near the Kutaisi metallurgical plant (“We Want Oxygen” and “Ecology Is Irreplaceable”), soil contamination caused by a fire on the Gumathesi territory, renewable energy consumption, and the tension between two villages in Chiatura and “Georgian Manganese,” titled “Ecological Genocide in Rgani and Tabagrebi: Disaster Zone in the City of ‘Black Gold.’”

„Firstnews.ge“ *deserves mention for dedicating several articles to ecological problems, including:*

- “The Planet Is on the Brink of Catastrophe – How Should We Combat Plastic Use in the Modern World?”
- “One Day, Humanity Will Face Food Shortages – What Threats Do Environmentalists Discuss?”
- “A New Meeting on Climate Change Issues Was Held with Journalists from Imereti in Kutaisi”
- “Environmentalists Discuss Climate Threats”
- “Five Important Facts About the Black Sea.”

Among „**First news**“ analytical materials, several are notable for featuring experts who analyze environmental problems and propose solutions. For example, in the article about plastic pollution, the journalist interviews Ketevan Tskhakaia, head of the “Spectrum” scientific association of Imereti, discussing why plastic pollution is a major threat and how its use can be reduced.

Another article — “One Day, Humanity Will Face Food Shortages”— is structured as an interview with Nuzgar Kokhreidze, founder of the organization “Dialogue of Generations,” and Elena Gamqrelidze, professor of ecology at Akaki Tsereteli University. They discuss the climate crisis in Georgia and potential solutions.

By contrast, „**Info imereti**“ and „**Top-News**“ primarily focus on economic, political, and social topics. Environmental and ecological content forms an almost negligible share of their material. The items that do appear do not address the essence of the environmental issues.

Results and Conclusions

Based on the aforementioned analysis, it can be stated confidently that in contemporary reality, the media plays a decisive role in covering climate change, pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and other environmental problems. It must not only disseminate environmental material but also raise public awareness and foster a responsible attitude toward climate issues.

This small-scale study shows that the content of Georgian regional online media is overloaded with various urgent topics—primarily politics. Environmental problems receive insufficient coverage in terms of both time and attention.

Although some material on natural disasters can be found, they constitute only a minor portion of the topics that should be covered, and the available content does not offer deep, multidimensional analysis of environmental issues.

The primary cause of this issue may be the limited financial resources of regional media outlets—many survive only minimally or without stable income. Another major problem is the absence of environmental journalists. For a general-topic reporter, covering environmental issues is difficult, as it requires specialized, domain-specific knowledge. As a result, journalists tend to focus on urgent economic and social issues. However, environmental problems are globally acute and affect populations in both central and regional areas equally.

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