

Environmental Journalism in Georgia: A Critical Assessment of Current Practices

Salome Kalandadze

Alte University

Journalism Graduate

Research Supervisor: Nina Kheladze

Alte University

Visiting Lecturer

Abstract

This article explores how and at what stage environmental and climate issues become topics of media interest—gaining informational relevance and socio-political significance—and to what extent we encounter the practice where environmental and climate-related topics fail to enter the media agenda unless they involve an element of sensationalism. The study is based on a multifaceted analysis that includes various academic and journalistic research, statistical data, and in-depth interviews with experts. The analysis of this material provides an understanding of what types of environmental issues appear in the media sphere and at what stage they are covered. The lack of discussion around these topics has diminished public attention toward crucial issues such as environmental protection and climate change. Observation of recent media content shows that environmental topics have become relatively secondary for the media, despite the fact that these are precisely the issues reflecting systemic challenges—challenges whose neglect could lead to more tragic consequences in the future. Therefore, it is the media’s responsibility not only to respond to outcomes but also to increase the frequency of reporting on topics that may not be considered “news” today, yet may become tomorrow’s tragedy—tragedies that could be prevented or at least mitigated through early awareness. The paper discusses several specific cases that only received media attention after the events took

on a dramatic character—such as the tragedies in Shovi and Baghdati, the incident in the village of Nergeeti, and the landslide hazard zone in Vashlijvari. However, the article also describes opposite practices. The main focus of the study is on the Georgian media as an institution that is overly oriented toward sensationalism rather than prevention. To illustrate this, three examples from the recent past are analyzed.

In August 2023, the landslide in Shovi became one of the most large-scale ecological and humanitarian disasters Georgia has faced in recent years. The event clearly demonstrated the growing significance of geological risks caused by climate change and revealed how unprepared society remains in the face of such threats. What makes the Shovi landslide particularly alarming is the fact that geological and hydrometeorological risks associated with the area had been documented in advance—both by state agencies and independent researchers. However, this information never became a subject of media interest until the tragedy occurred. According to the 2024 reports of the National Environmental Agency, which discuss the causal factors behind the Shovi disaster, the Racha region has repeatedly been identified as highly sensitive—particularly due to deforestation and soil saturation resulting from climate change. One of these reports specifically indicates that the Racha-Lechkhumi zone is characterized by high landslide activity and unstable land surfaces. It also emphasizes that the increase in atmospheric precipitation caused by climate change, combined with forest degradation, significantly heightens the risk of landslides. The geological profile of Shovi already suggested that even a minimal trigger could have been enough to initiate a catastrophic landslide. The delayed reaction of the media manifested in the near absence of coverage on these issues until the disaster claimed dozens of lives and destroyed infrastructure. This reflects a central problem—the media’s approach is reactive rather than preventive.

On February 7, 2024, a rockfall-type landslide occurred in the territory of the village of Nergeeti, in the Baghdati municipality. This part of Imereti belongs to the category of geologically active and landslide-prone areas and has appeared multiple times in national mapping projects of geological hazard zones. During that period, the region

experienced intense and prolonged rainfall, which triggered the slope's mobilization for the landslide. Late at night on February 7, the landslide in Nergeeti blocked the central highway on the right bank of the Khanistskali River and destroyed four houses. Rescuers recovered nine bodies from the debris. Residents told *Radio Liberty* that they had observed creeping soil movement and cracks on the slope for a long time. Several locals also mentioned that one of the residents had even brought a geologist to inspect the site. According to the 2023 informational bulletin of the National Environmental Agency's Geology Department, landslide activity was expected in seven villages of the Baghdati district that year—one of them being Nergeeti. The village had previously drawn the agency's attention multiple times. As noted in *iFact's* investigation (July 30, 2024), the local government was well aware that the area was landslide-prone, as one resident's property had been inspected twice, in 2017 and 2022. The Baghdati landslide clearly illustrates that information gathering, assessment, early warning, and prevention remain systemic shortcomings—despite existing research, issued recommendations, and extensive data availability.

From a geological standpoint, the Vashlijvari area is one of the most problematic zones in Tbilisi. The landslide that occurred there damaged the roadway, resulting in the restriction of two-way traffic on Machavariani Street and the adjacent slopes. Water pipes were also damaged, and the large-scale ground movement posed a serious threat to the safety of local residents. For years, both the National Environmental Agency (NEA) and various urban development documents of Tbilisi have noted that Vashlijvari is considered a region of high landslide activity. One such project was conducted in 2019 by the Geology Department of the National Environmental Agency under the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia. The project provided an extensive assessment of Tbilisi's engineering-geodynamic conditions and geological hazards. According to the data, the Vashlijvari area is particularly vulnerable to landslide processes due to the steep slope angle, the presence of soft geological layers, and the unregulated flow of surface waters. Vashlijvari was included among the zones where urban load was not supposed to increase because of existing geological risks. However, the plan's

recommendations were ignored both by governing bodies and by some developers. In this case as well, despite prior knowledge and warnings, the media practically failed to cover the risks in Vashlijvari until the landslide had already caused visible damage. The Vashlijvari case exemplifies how the lack of public discussion on environmental and climate-related risks emerges when the media avoids proactive analysis and preventive reporting.

In recent years, the trend of covering climate change and environmental protection topics in Georgia's media space has become increasingly active. Despite a number of challenges that demonstrate the opposite practice, there are still examples where the media adopts preventive and proactive approaches in reporting environmental and climate-related issues. Such practices contribute to changing today's media reality, raising public awareness, and supporting the adaptation of traditional news delivery models. A recent example of preventive media engagement can be seen in the coverage of the development project in the Goderdzi Pass area. On March 13, 2024, *Tok TV* published an investigative piece by Lamuna Iremashvili that explored how the proper development of the Goderdzi resorts should be carried out, emphasizing risk assessment and the consideration of local community interests. The article included interviews with Hurie Abashidze, a member of the organization *Solidarity Theme*; Jemal Saginadze, a Khulo resident and civic activist; Irakli Mikeladze, a representative of CENN; and Nadim Vasadze, the Deputy Mayor of Khulo. Beyond providing synchronized updates at each stage of the project's progress, their subsequent report featured an innovative approach—using drone technology to engage in dialogue with local residents. (This report later received a special European Union award.)

Another example from *Tok TV* is the article "Landslide in Ude–Adigeni", published by Misho Darbaidze on March 13, 2025. The piece tells the story of a landslide that struck the village of Ude a year earlier, destroying houses and forcing residents to abandon their homes and relocate. The report includes comments from Gocha Khimadze, the Mayor of Adigeni, as well as assessments from local residents and

Nino Chkhobadze, the head of the NGO *Green Movement – Friends of the Earth*.

It is also essential to highlight the journalistic work of *Mtis Ambebi* (“Mountain Stories”) in covering environmental and climate issues. *Mtis Ambebi* is an independent news outlet that actively reports on the major challenges faced by people in Georgia’s highland regions through in-depth storytelling and multimedia journalism. One notable example is the article published on August 12, 2021, titled “What Is Happening Around the Namakhvani HPP – The Untold Details of the Mediation Process.” The piece provides an overview of the events surrounding the Namakhvani hydropower plant and focuses on the undisclosed aspects of the mediation process. The article explains how the HPP issue evolved from being merely an energy policy matter into a broader topic of social, political, and legal debate. It presents the perspectives of various stakeholders—civil activists, government representatives, the investor company, and international organizations—and raises critical questions about the fairness and accountability of the mediation process. Ultimately, the article highlights the growing crisis of trust between the state and segments of Georgian society.

Climate change and environmental problems are regarded as some of the most significant challenges of the modern world; however, these topics often receive limited attention in the daily media agenda. Despite the alarming scale of global warming, ecosystem degradation, and the depletion of natural resources, media practices in covering these issues in a systematic and deeply analytical manner are often fragmented and inconsistent. A range of underlying factors contribute to this situation—factors that determine the selective attention and prioritization of topics within the media landscape. One of the main factors is economic interest, which influences both the management of media platforms and their editorial policies. In commercial media, the priority remains to cover topics that are considered engaging and “profitable” for a wide audience segment. Another significant factor is the complexity and weight of the topic itself. Climate-related issues require detailed analysis, interpretation of scientific data, and assessment of long-term consequences—all of which are difficult to

reconcile with the media's inherent preference for speed and simplicity. Public perception also plays a major role in shaping media choices. Society has yet to fully develop a deep understanding of the climate crisis, which results in relatively low interest in the topic. The media, in turn, tends to cater to audience expectations rather than challenge their ideological frameworks—further deepening the informational vacuum surrounding environmental issues.

To develop concrete recommendations, in-depth interviews were conducted with various specialists. Analysis of these interviews clearly showed that coverage of climate and environmental issues in Georgian media requires both structural and content-related improvements. Although there are journalists and media platforms actively working to highlight these topics, the general practice still faces deficiencies in frequency, depth, and professionalism. When respondents were asked about potential recommendations during the study, their insights went beyond individual opinions and outlined specific practical directions capable of influencing media quality, journalists' awareness, and strategies for covering climate-related topics. These recommendations are grounded in direct professional experience, both in journalism and environmental work. Coverage of climate and environmental issues in the Georgian media landscape requires significant improvement at content, systemic, and organizational levels.

First and foremost, the media must become an active intermediary between society, government institutions, and the business sector. As Natia Kuprashvili notes: *"We need to somehow facilitate dialogue with businesses and government institutions and increase local citizens' participation. Divided opinions and interests cannot exist on this issue, because future outcomes and the situation affect all three equally."* Beyond thematic dialogue, the media's internal organizational structure requires improvement. It is essential to systematize effective and reliable information sources and create easily accessible platforms (hubs) for journalists. Nona Samkharadze emphasizes: *"Hubs should be established so that journalists know whom to contact as a reliable respondent. Additionally, journalists' awareness must be raised, and professional staff should be retrained."* The existence of

such systems would reduce superficiality and alarmist tendencies. The media's role should not be limited to reacting to crisis situations. There is a need to develop preventive communication, including the implementation of systematic alerts about climate-related threats. Nugzar Suaridze states: *"We should not be trailing behind like a lamp; we need to develop a system of preliminary alerts, and this should operate on a daily basis."* From a geological perspective, earthquakes, landslides, and droughts are constant natural threats in Georgia, making this one of the most important recommendations. Finally, it is essential to activate individual and ethical responsibility in journalism. As Irakli Macharashvili notes: *"Many must put their heart into their work and remain independent."* This position underscores that coverage of climate issues cannot rely solely on institutional reforms—it requires journalists' personal motivation, awareness of professional standards, and a deep understanding of the topic's significance. The recommendations outlined above provide a solid foundation for the comprehensive development of climate coverage in Georgian media. Following them ensures not only public awareness but also pressure on state institutions and contributes to the shared goal of building an ecologically sustainable future. The media inherently holds unique power in shaping public consciousness; it can shift the areas of societal interest and focus with relative ease. It also has the capacity to influence people's values and behavior—for example, the more actively and systematically climate and environmental issues are covered, the greater public engagement and demand for such information will become. The media must approach these topics with the same responsibility as it does other "hot" issues, such as politics, conflicts, or emergency events. Consequently, there is an urgent need to: Re-evaluating priorities in the media to ensure that environmental and climate change issues become a permanent part of coverage—not only as reactive reporting but as an element of preventive policy. Implementing a systematic information policy that does not wait for catastrophic outcomes but actively communicates predictable threats with the same enthusiasm and urgency as political or social topics. Sustainable collaboration with state institutions, including geological services, the National Environmental Agency, and academic circles conducting research and projects and subsequently publishing their

findings. Engagement of civil society and media support for analytical and scientific information, allowing the public to at least superficially understand how ongoing changes may impact the environment. If the media landscape adopts these recommendations, it will be possible to exert a long-term influence on public opinion. Strengthening preventive analysis and communication is therefore an urgent task, directly linked to the protection of human life, ecosystem sustainability, and societal well-being. The practical implementation of these recommendations would enable the media to become not only a reactive tool but also a preventive and educational force—an essential component for fostering a society resilient to climate crises.

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