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# THE PRODUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS:

## A STUDY OF SOURCE-MEDIA RELATIONS

ALISON ANDERSON

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University of Greenwich  
in collaboration with  
Professor Philip Schlesinger  
University of Stirling



# CONTENTS

	Page No
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>(i)</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>(ii)</b>
<b>Chapter One</b> Introduction .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter Two</b> Mass Communications Research: A Critique of the Dominant Paradigm .....	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter Three</b> Review of the Literature on Environmental Issues and the Media .....	<b>39</b>
<b>Chapter Four</b> Methodological Approaches .....	<b>68</b>
<b>Chapter Five</b> Press Coverage of the Environment: Producers' Attitudes and Perceptions .....	<b>105</b>
<b>Chapter Six</b> Television Coverage of the Environment: News, Current Affairs and Documentary Programming .....	<b>148</b>
<b>Chapter Seven</b> The Production of News: The Relationship Between NGOs, the DoE and the Media .....	<b>177</b>
<b>Chapter Eight</b> Case Study of the National Press Coverage of the Seal Virus .....	<b>214</b>
<b>Chapter Nine</b> Case Study of the Hinkley 'C' Inquiry .....	<b>245</b>
<b>Chapter Ten</b> Conclusion .....	<b>276</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>301</b>
<i>Appendices</i>	
<b>Appendix 1:</b> List of Interview Transcripts .....	<b>317</b>
<b>Appendix 2:</b> Interview Schedules .....	<b>320</b>

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyses the production of environmental news and focuses upon the neglected area of source-media relations. Through a combination of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and content analysis, the study explores relations between media practitioners and key news sources, such as environmental pressure groups, related interest groups, scientists and the Department of the Environment. It suggests that a major lacuna exists within the analysis of source-media relations. Researchers have, until recently, adopted a media-centric position and have rarely considered the perceptions of the sources themselves. This thesis, then, fills an important gap in the literature. It argues that through largely focusing upon the ways in which media make use of sources, the sociology of mass communications has ignored a fundamental aspect of news production.

The hypothesis that environmental pressure groups are becoming increasingly adept in their approaches towards the media was supported by the research findings. Many of the campaigning pressure groups that were formed in the 1970s have become established news sources and key definers of the political agenda. During the late 1980s many environmental pressure groups experienced greater access to television and the press. This thesis highlights a number of weaknesses with the structuralist model of source-dependency which maintains that official sources such as government or the courts, command privileged access to the media by virtue of their representative status, institutional standing, or their claims to expert knowledge. It suggests that a new model of source-media relations needs to be developed.

While official sources tend to gain greater access to the media than non-official sources such as pressure groups, the evidence suggests that this observation needs to be qualified in a number of respects. First, this study indicates that it fails to take into account inequalities of access among 'accredited sources'. Second, it neglects the role of the media as definers in the agenda-setting process. Third, the structuralist model fails to analyse the varying degrees with which media practitioners judge the claims of 'primary definers'. The study indicates that journalists and broadcasters tend to view Friends of the Earth as more

credible than Greenpeace. Finally, this thesis indicates that evidence about patterns of source-dependence deduced from content analysis or journalistic evidence needs to be supplemented by interviews with the sources themselves.

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# **Chapter One**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

- (i) New Directions in Mass Communications Research
- (ii) The Rise of Environmentalism
- (iii) Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle
- (iv) Organisation of the Thesis





what sort of an effect this has upon audiences. Also, it is important to consider the role the media have played in politicising environmentalism.

A number of general opinion surveys indicate that the British and American publics are concerned about a variety of environmental issues (for example, Anthony, 1982; Keeter, 1984; Kessel, 1985; Phillips, 1990). Also, long term trends in public opinion poll data suggest that public concern about global environmental problems has increased since the early eighties (Gallup Economic and Political Index 1986, 1988 and 1990; Warren, 1990). However, opinion polls provide a rather superficial guide to the strength of concern about environmental topics. Indeed, evidence about the influence of the media upon public opinion about environmental matters is relatively sparse and few clear-cut conclusions can be drawn (cf. Burgess, 1990a). While some studies suggest that the media have played an important role in influencing public concern about the environment (for example, Parlour and Schatzow, 1978; Atwater et al. 1985; and Salwen, 1988), others indicate that the media have not directly influenced public attitudes about specific environmental issues (for example, Protess et al. 1987; Gunter and Wober, 1983 and Wober and Gunter, 1985). However, one must treat these findings with caution. A major limitation of content analysis and social survey techniques is that they offer little evidence about the effects of media coverage on public attitudes over time. Moreover, in focusing on the manifest content of media texts, they assume that meanings are non-negotiable. As Burgess maintains:

"It seems much more likely that the media are contributing to longer term changes in the ways in which human-environment relations are construed-but the research needs to be done to show whether this is the case or not."  
(1990a:143)

However, in recent years a number of studies have begun to analyse aspects of the media coverage of environmental affairs in a more sophisticated way (Burgess, 1990a; Corner, Richardson and Fenton, 1990a and 1990b; Hansen, 1990a and 1990b; MacMillan, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Silverstone, 1985; Warren, 1990). Current research has moved beyond the simplistic 'hypodermic' model, which assumed that the media have a direct, unmediated effect upon audiences and that the audience is comprised of a mass of atomised individuals who are highly susceptible to persuasion. New theoretical approaches are developing, based upon different sorts of assumptions, which recognise the complexities of the encoding and

decoding processes. This new research partly represents a response to the charge that critical theoretical models were failing to address questions about audience consumption (cf. Fejes, 1984). Recent research suggests that audiences do not necessarily accept the 'preferred' reading of media texts but interpret them in a variety of different ways, depending upon a range of social, cultural and personal factors (Burgess, 1990a; Corner, Richardson and Fenton, 1990a and 1990b; Graber, 1988; Lindlof, 1987; Lindlof & Meyer 1987; Moores, 1990; Morley 1980 and 1986; Morley and Silverstone, 1990).

New directions are also emerging in the analysis of the production process. Until recently, production studies concentrated upon studying media organisations and largely ignored the crucial role which sources play in the creation of agendas and the maintenance of public interest in social issues (Gans, 1980; Schlesinger, 1990). And where researchers have considered the strategies that sources employ, this has tended to be from a media-centric position. Indeed, we have very little knowledge about the strategies that non-governmental organisations in the field of environmental affairs, as in other areas, employ towards gaining media attention. What are their aims? How do they see themselves shaping the agenda? How do they view media coverage? What level of resources do they command? What kind of public images do they try to cultivate? How successful are they in attracting media attention and what factors determine this? These sorts of questions have rarely been addressed in the literature. Clearly these are major issues that need to be addressed. However, more sophisticated studies of the production process are beginning to develop which offer source-centred accounts of the way in which texts in general (Schlesinger, 1990), and texts dealing with nature conservation issues in particular (Burgess, 1990a), are created. Indeed, one of the aims of the thesis has been to provide a source-centred analysis of the production of environmental meanings in the media.

The thesis will suggest that previous studies have tended to be based upon quantitative methods, such as social surveys (for example, Brookes et al. 1976). Also, they have tended to treat the media in an undifferentiated manner and have generally failed to explore the complexities of the interaction of public agendas (the hierarchy of issues the public are concerned about) with media agendas (those social issues which the media deem to be important).

In order to understand the environmental revolution which has taken place one needs to analyse the underlying causes of the social changes which are taking place. Sociological analysis of the media coverage of environmental affairs must be rooted within an historical perspective which acknowledges the importance of social, political and cultural influences upon the media, as well as the ways in which the media shape culture. What factors caused this change in attitudes to come about? To what extent is this renewed interest transitory? And how did the environment become a mainstream political issue?

**(ii) The Rise of Environmentalism**

The view that concern about environmental issues is a modern development is a popular misconception. There has been speculation about acid pollution since the 1700s, about global warming since the 1930s, while the importance of the thinning of the ozone layer was first recognised in the 1970s (Gribbin, 1988; Lowenthal, 1990; McCormick, 1989). However, different sorts of environmental concerns have dominated different periods of British history.

Early environmental interest in Victorian times focused upon local amenity issues and upon protecting domestic wildlife. The activities of a small number of voluntary groups, who were largely composed of middle-class philanthropists, were to lay the foundations of what later became known as the environmental movement (McCormick, 1989; Nicholson, 1987). These voluntary groups were largely reactive towards the media. After the Second World War, environmental concern took on a more international flavour and associations such as the International Organisation for the Protection of Nature were founded. The United Nations played a major role in promoting these initiatives. Furthermore, as the environmental movement evolved, a number of official government bodies were established, such as the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC), which was formed in 1949. And the second director-general of the Nature Conservancy Council, Max Nicholson, a leading actor in the early development of the nature conservation movement, formed the Council for Nature. The Council's Intelligence Unit provided a crucial news-gathering function for the movement as a whole (Nicholson, 1987). However, it was not until the 1970s that environmental concerns

became institutionalised on a wide scale. As Schoenfeld, Meier and Griffin (1979) observe, in their study of the American press and the environment:

"... prior to 1970 there were no comprehensive government agencies to help 'stage' environmental events. Without a series of news events to refer to, reporters could not really see the environment as a holistic concept until NEPA and Earth-Day made 'news'.... Once those bureaucracies were staffed with professionals and managers in class consonance with reporters and editors, 'the environment' changed quickly and markedly. Environmental issues gained stable press salience both because the issues had become professionalised - 'de-scholared' - and because they had been placed in the care of people who not only 'spoke the same language' as reporters and editors but were adept at creating the interpersonal communication that leads to space in the press." (1979:50-51)

During the 1970s a whole number of pressure groups, including environmental bodies, were formed across the advanced industrial world. In Britain, they included Friends of the Earth (FoE) (1970) and Greenpeace (1972). In contrast to earlier organisations, these new groups generally adopted more radical campaigning approaches and, increasingly, they recognised the importance of using the media to their advantage. It was in the early 1970s that environmentalism first took off in Britain with the publication of The Limits to Growth Report in 1972. This offered social scientific arguments in support of the theory that the world's resources were finite and in danger of becoming exhausted by the end of the century. But the increase in public concern, heightened by Limits to Growth, began to wane after its alarmist predictions were rapidly undermined through counter-evidence.

The environmental movement in Britain, then, evolved from traditional nature conservation groups but took on a much broader agenda of issues. It is difficult to arrive at a general definition of environmentalism since it encompasses a variety of philosophical strands, from eco-radicalism to more traditional mainstream thinking (Pepper, 1984), and a wide range of issues, from nature conservation and landscape change, to green consumerism and pollution. But whilst nature conservation was essentially about preserving the natural environment, modern environmentalism embraces a whole political movement which challenges the basis of our relationship with nature. As McCormick (1989) argues:

"... if nature protection had been a moral crusade centred on the nonhuman environment and conservation a utilitarian movement centred on the rational management of natural resources, environmentalism centred on humanity and

its surroundings. For protectionists, the issue was wildlife and habitat; for the New Environmentalists, human survival itself was at stake. There was a broader conception of man in the biosphere, a more sophisticated understanding of that relationship, and a note of crisis that was greater and broader than it had been in the earlier conservation movement." (1989: 47-48)

Modern environmentalism, then, has become particularly concerned with the effects of environmental degradation upon humans; rather than with the damage that humans are doing to nature. How did this revolution in attitudes towards the environment come about? Although a number of influences can be isolated, it should be stressed that these constitute partial explanations of complex phenomena.

Undoubtedly, one of the most important factors was increased scientific knowledge about the deterioration of the environment. Rachel Carson's seminal Silent Spring (1962), which described the harmful side-effects of pesticide use, had a considerable impact. Vast numbers of the book were sold around the world and it became a best seller in America. As well as influencing public awareness about environmental issues, Carson's book had a significant political impact. Although Silent Spring generated much controversy, President Kennedy made reference to Carson's research in a press conference that year, as well as commissioning a study into pesticide use.

It seems likely that another major factor which accounted, in part, for the gradual increase in concern about environmental and health related issues was the occurrence of a number of environmental catastrophes during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. The large oil spills at Torrey Canyon (1967) and Santa Barbara (1969) attracted a great deal of media attention because they were the first events of their kind and their consequences were dramatic and clearly visible (cf. Parlour and Schatzow, 1978). Whether the media attention to these events had a substantial impact upon public opinion is not clear and further research needs to be carried out. However, it seems likely that these incidents fuelled public concern about environmental issues. As McCormick suggests:

"The effects of these and other environmental disasters was to draw wider public attention to the threats facing the environment. People were sensitized to the potential costs of careless economic development now lent growing

support by a series of local and national environmental campaigns, which were given wide media attention." (1989:60)

In addition, a number of chemical incidents heightened concern. Perhaps two of the most publicised disasters were Love Canal (1976), when toxic chemicals leaked into the basements of houses in close proximity to Love Canal in America and Bhopal (1984), when a deadly toxic gas escaped from the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, affecting hundreds of thousands of local residents and workers. Further, a series of accidents in the late 1970s and 1980s served to undermine public confidence in nuclear power. The radioactive gases that escaped from the nuclear power plants at Three Mile Island (1978) and Chernobyl (1986), led to widespread fear about the safety of the nuclear industry. This added to the concern about nuclear fallout which emerged with the advent of nuclear testing (McCormick, 1989).

A further factor accounting for this transformation were the links the environmental movement forged with other social protest movements. During the 1950s and 1960s a number of radical social movements, such as the civil rights, the anti-war and the anti-nuclear movement, evoked a new atmosphere of political protest in Western Europe. They laid the foundations for the establishment of new campaign-oriented environmental groups, such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, which were formed in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Indeed, many of the students involved in the anti-nuclear and anti-war movements joined the environmental movement when earlier causes had lost their impetus.

Recent advances in technology have meant that more sophisticated computer models of the causes and effects of environmental problems have been developed. (Although there is still a great deal of uncertainty about the significance of some environmental issues due to their complexity). As Lowenthal suggests:

"Above all, environmental impacts have increasingly come to seem global and interrelated, complex and unknowable, long-lasting and prospectively irreversible. None of these perspectives is wholly new... But only since the 1950s they have come to dominate scientific apprehensions and public fears and to pervade and polarise environmental debate." (Lowenthal 1990:10)

In particular, there has been increasing scientific knowledge about global warming during the 1980s. The conferences at Villach and Bellagio, during the Autumn of 1987, provided clear evidence about the effects of the warming of the earth's atmosphere, and delegates urged politicians to take measures to curb this process. Indeed, G.M. Woodward's testimonial to the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources (June 1988), which summarised the conclusions of the Villach-Bellagio Report about global warming, was sent to Mrs Thatcher by Sir Crispin Tickell, the British Ambassador to the United Nations. In his testimony Woodward claimed that there was growing agreement among scientists about the existence and the seriousness of the problem: "Several points about climatic change now constitute a consensus held by meteorologists and other scientists who have worked on this problem." Further, James Hansen (of NASA) gave a testimony to the Toronto Conference, which was held during the American drought in the summer of 1988. This fortuitous coincidence caused some people to conclude that dramatic swings in temperature were already taking place. One news report predicted:

"... while bureaucrats move cautiously, insisting on cost-benefit analyses before taking steps to correct a problem, politicians act in response to public perceptions. As drought remains in the news, the public belief that it is related to the build up of greenhouse gases may grow. By September, as forest fires result from the dry conditions and the presidential campaign moves into full swing, climate control could well become a campaign issue." ('Heated Response to US Drought', 'Nature', Vol. 334, 4th July 1988: 92)

It is likely that accumulating evidence about global warming, the thinning of the ozone layer and acid rain influenced Mrs Thatcher publicly to acknowledge her commitment to environmental issues. In her address to the Royal Society, on the 27th September 1988, Mrs Thatcher stated:

"For generations we have assumed that the efforts of mankind would leave the fundamental equilibrium of the world's systems and atmosphere stable. But it is possible that with all these enormous changes (population, agricultural, use of fossil fuels) concentrated into such a short period of time, we have unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of the planet itself."

The speech preceded the Conservative Party Conference in October 1988, when there were more than seventy resolutions on environmental and planning issues. However, the mounting political pressure in Britain reflected developments which had been accelerating in

Europe for some time. Mrs Thatcher, along with other heads of state, was also undoubtedly influenced by the rise of Green Parties in Western Europe and by opinion polls indicating increased public concern about the environment. In March 1983, 27 Green Party candidates were elected to the West German Bundestag, while in other countries ecology parties were gaining increasing support. Indeed, during 1984 a number of reports suggested that Mrs Thatcher was reconsidering her attitudes about the political importance of the environment, a concern which had traditionally been the preserve of the Liberal Party (cf. Lowe and Flynn, 1989). And in 1989, at the June European elections, when the Green Parties polled 2.29 million votes, the growing popularity of the Greens forced politicians of all parties to pay more attention to environmental issues. So, clearly, Mrs Thatcher was influenced by a renewed emphasis upon international initiatives to deal with global problems. Mrs Thatcher's speech itself was a major catalyst, propelling the issue up the political agenda and persuading press and broadcast editors that the environment was considered important enough to deserve specialist coverage.

The Green Consumer Guide, which was released early in September 1988, provided the public with practical information about environmentally friendly products and received widespread media coverage, particularly in the popular press. Green consumerism, with its emphasis upon human health, became the slogan of the late 1980s and whipped up a great deal of support for environmental issues. Indeed, the growth in environmental awareness owed much to the increasing prosperity and stability of advanced industrial societies. Periods of heightened environmental activity have taken place at comparable phases of economic development; they have occurred at the end of stretches of sustained economic growth (cf. Lowe and Goyder, 1983; McCormick, 1989). Indeed, environmentalism is a largely middle-class phenomenon and its increased appeal reflects, to some extent, the expansion of the middle class in West European societies (cf. Cotgrove and Duff, 1980). In general terms, people only develop a concern about the quality of life once they have fully satisfied basic requirements such as the need for economic security and well-being (cf. Maslow, 1954). Maslow has suggested that a hierarchy of human needs exists and once the basic requirements for survival, security and belonging have been met individuals develop 'higher order' needs. These requirements include the need for self-esteem, the esteem of others, and the development of the intellect and aesthetic appreciation to its full potential.



Post-industrialists later developed this idea and claimed that people in advanced industrial societies are becoming more 'inner-directed'; they have become more concerned with others and with issues such as the quality of life. However, such explanations have come under considerable criticism (cf. Lowe and Rudig, 1986). Rather than the growth of environmentalism reflecting the development of a more altruistic outlook on life, public support for environmental issues tends to fluctuate according to economic self-interest.

The previous peak in environmental concern took place during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of general affluence and equilibrium. Similarly, opinion polls carried out by MORI suggest that the height of the current wave of public concern about environmental issues occurred during the summer of 1989, when there was relative economic and political stability. Public interest plummeted towards the end of 1990, when the effects of the economic recession were beginning to bite. In July 1989, 35% of those polled by MORI claimed that pollution and the environment was the most important issue facing Britain, whilst in August 1990, when the Gulf Crisis worsened, defence and foreign affairs, together with prices and inflation, were viewed as the most important issues facing Britain. And by February 1991 according to MORI polls, only 5% thought that pollution and the environment were the most important topics at that time.

### **(iii) Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle**

Some researchers have suggested that interest in environmental issues goes through a cycle of fervent concern and increasing boredom. Downs (1972) has argued that interest in American social issues is transient. He claims:

"I believe there is a systematic 'issue-attention' cycle in American domestic affairs. This cycle causes certain individual problems to leap to prominence, remain there for a short time and then gradually fade from public attention - although still largely unresolved." (Downs, 1973:59)

Downs argues that there are five main stages in the cycle: (1) the 'pre-problem' stage; (2) 'alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm'; (3) 'realising the cost of significant progress'; (4) 'gradual decline of intense public interest' and (5) the 'post-problem' stage. In general, Downs suggests that an issue is likely to fade from media interest if its

dramatic/entertainment value decreases, if it no longer affects everyone or if it is not in the interests of the power holders in society and will involve a major upheaval or costs. However, he predicts that environmental issues are unlikely quickly to enter the 'post-problem' stage and fade from media attention because of the peculiar nature of environmental issues. That is, environmental problems tend to be more visible and threatening than other social issues; most environmental problems can be solved through technological means; environmentalism encompasses a wide range of causes and overrides political barriers; a small group in society (eg. industry) can be blamed and companies can profit from environmental products/services. Downs maintains:

"In my opinion it [the environment] has certain characteristics which will protect it from the rapid decline in public interest that has characterised many other recent social issues." (Downs, 1973:69)

Although interest in environmental issues is subject to fluctuations, if one looks at *broad* trends in public opinion then it appears that Downs was right: concern about the environment has not declined. An underlying latent interest remains, despite periods when economic self-interest takes priority. As McCormick rightly observes:

"Rather than enter a decline, environmentalism gradually became tempered by a less emotional and more carefully considered response to the problems of the environment. It shifted from euphoria to reason and temporarily became lodged in stage three, where, instead of discouragement in the face of the costs of action (which were often high, but perhaps no higher than the possible costs of inaction), the environment became a central public policy issue." (McCormick, 1989:65)

One major weakness of Downs' theory is that he fails to take into account the role which sources (such as government, scientists, industry or pressure groups) play in maintaining interest in social issues. The character and survival of issues on the political agenda is not solely determined by gatekeepers within media organisations; the activities of non-governmental organisations and official bodies play a crucial role in managing the news (Gandy, 1980; Lowe and Goyder, 1983; Solesbury, 1976). As McCormick argues:

"Downs' model fails to take account of the integration of popular issues with the political fabric of societies. Time and again, such social movements achieve some or all of their intended goals by transforming society; this happened with the civil rights and women's movements, it happened with anti-war movements, and it has happened with environmentalism. By no

means have the goals of all of these movements yet been achieved, but in most cases the social reformers successfully scaled the walls and entered the citadel of public policy." (McCormick, 1989:65-66)

A central argument, to be developed in further chapters, is that researchers have generally failed to pay adequate attention to news sources. When researchers have addressed the issue of sources, this has, with few exceptions, been from a media-centric position, and the argument that official sources necessarily secure advantaged access to the media has generally been uncritically accepted (Schlesinger, 1990). As Schlesinger observes:

"Once one begins to analyse the tactics and strategies pursued by sources seeking media attention, to ask about their perceptions of other, competing, actors in the fields over which they are trying to exert influence, to enquire about the financial resources at their disposal and the organisational contexts in which they operate, to ask about their goals and notions of effectiveness, one rapidly discovers how ignorant we are about such matters - and this despite the undoubted importance the contribution that production studies have made to the field." (1990:62)

Another key argument concerns the limitations of the agenda-setting approach. Much of the work that has been carried out in this area is located within the agenda-setting tradition, but with greater interest in the agenda than with environmental issues (cf. Burgess, 1990a). The notion of 'agenda-setting' suggests that media power lies in the ability to influence the range of issues we think about, rather than *what* we think.

Early agenda-setting studies tended to assert that there was a simple causal relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda (Schlesinger, 1988). However, a few studies have attempted to go beyond the traditional agenda-setting approach and have developed the concept of 'agenda-building' (for example, Lang and Lang, 1981). The process by which the media forge links between social issues and the political domain is a complex one and it should be acknowledged that many different variables are involved.

This study, then, sets out to fill important gaps in the literature on environmental issues and the media. It suggests that the comparative case study method is the most fruitful way of analysing the all-encompassing subject of the environment. While the majority of

existing work is located within the quantitative tradition, this study suggests that quantitative and qualitative methods are complementary. It is argued that, in addition to traditional quantitative techniques, qualitative methods provide a valuable means of extending our knowledge about sources' media strategies. Indeed, a central argument is that the structuralist model of source-dependency, which suggests that official sources necessarily secure advantaged access to the media, needs to be modified in certain respects. Moreover, existing theory on sources is rudimentary and a more sophisticated model of source-media relations needs to be developed.

#### **(iv) Organisation of the Thesis**

Chapter 2 provides a general review of some of the theoretical preoccupations of mass communications research to date. It offers an outline of traditional approaches and then turns to focus upon more recent ways of analysing the mass media. The theoretical critique suggests that the traditional paradigms suffer from a number of weaknesses. Researchers have tended to assume that the media have a direct influence upon audiences; they tended to generalise about the media without distinguishing within and across media, and between local and national media, and they have paid very little attention to the role of sources in shaping the agenda.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on environmental issues and the mass media. It suggests that early studies of environmental coverage were generally characterised by the same sorts of theoretical limitations as traditional models of media effects. Also, with only a few exceptions, early studies were atheoretical and ad hoc. It argues that a more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of the interaction between sources, producers, consumers and the wider political arena needs to be developed.

Chapter 4 offers a general overview of the main methodological approaches which have been used to study the media. The methodological shortcomings of previous research into environmental coverage, which was largely quantitative, are discussed. The second half of the chapter provides a detailed account of the present research strategy. Between January 1988 and May 1991 thirty-nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the

following: journalists covering environmental issues in the national daily press and Sunday newspapers; broadcasters covering environmental affairs; representatives of environmental pressure groups; representatives of related interest groups; press officers at the Department of the Environment and representatives of industry. In addition, this was supplemented by a week's content analysis of nine national newspapers: The Daily Telegraph; The Times; The Guardian; The Independent; The Financial Times; The Daily Mirror; The Daily Express; The Daily Mail and Today. Finally, two case studies were made of the coverage of specific environmental issues. A content analysis was made of the coverage of the seal virus by all the national daily and the Sunday newspapers, during the month of August 1988. In addition, a content analysis was made of The Bristol Evening Post's coverage of the Inquiry into the building of a second nuclear pressurised water reactor (PWR) at Hinkley Point in Somerset.

Chapter 5 discusses the major findings of the interviews with print journalists and the content analysis data from the sample of a week's national press coverage of industrial pollution issues. It charts the process through which environmental issues became a mainstream area within journalism, and the appointment of Environment Correspondents across the press. In particular, it discusses the way in which sections of the tabloid press responded to political developments and the fierce competition that ensued among middle market newspapers. The journalists' relationship with the audience is examined and the extent of their personal interest in environmental issues is discussed.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings of the interviews with television journalists. A comparison is made between the sorts of 'news values' used by journalists writing for national newspapers and the news values of television news and current affairs journalists. This involves a discussion of the various constraints which affect print journalists and broadcast journalists, and the different constraints which limit what can be done in a news bulletin compared to a documentary series. Finally, journalists' relationships with their major sources (environmental groups, scientists, industry and government) are analysed. This leads into a discussion in Chapter 7 of the broader context in which media texts are produced.

Chapter 7 concentrates upon discussing the findings of interviews with representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and official sources. The media strategies of four contrasting environmental groups (Friends of the Earth; Greenpeace; The National Trust and the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection (NSCA) are discussed in some detail. Additionally, Chapter 7 discusses the media strategies employed by the press office at the Department of the Environment. The mobilisation of resources (such as staff, organisational factors, finance, skills) is considered in some depth, as is the relationship between environmental groups and government.

Chapter 8 takes the argument about the centrality of sources one stage further by providing evidence to suggest that sources play a crucial 'gatekeeping' role. This chapter discusses the case study of national press coverage of the seal epidemic, which affected large numbers of seals in the North Sea during 1988 and 1989. It looks at the way that different sources acted as 'primary definers' at various stages and at the conflict between the values and work cycles of scientists, and journalistic time schedules and news sense. Consideration is also made of the way that different newspapers covered the epidemic and the role that The Daily Mail's 'Save our Seals' campaign played, in particular, through alerting politicians to pay greater attention to the quality of the environment as a whole.

Chapter 9 focuses on a case study of the Inquiry into the building of a second nuclear pressurised water reactor at Hinkley Point in Somerset. An analysis of national and local press coverage of the Inquiry is made, suggesting that there were important differences in the way that regional and national newspapers covered the Inquiry. The chapter draws upon some of the issues which were raised in Chapter 7, and discusses the role which unequal resources played in constraining the media strategies of the non-governmental groups who put the case against the siting of the reactor. Also, it considers the peculiar nature of the public inquiry process as a ritualised 'court' proceeding and the problem of simplifying highly complex technical arguments into layperson's language.

Finally, Chapter 10 extends earlier debates about the study of sources within mass communications research, and makes a number of recommendations for future research in this field.

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# **Chapter Two**

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## **MASS COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH:**

### **A CRITIQUE OF THE DOMINANT PARADIGM**

#### **Section One**

- (i) The Effects Tradition
- (ii) The Uses and Gratifications Approach

#### **Section Two**

- (i) The Critical Tradition
- (ii) Agenda-setting Theories
- (iii) Developing a Source-Centred Model



## **Introduction**

Research into the media coverage of environmental issues must be considered in terms of the general theoretical and empirical models that inform mass communications research as a whole. Indeed, if one is to avoid a too narrowly focused approach the following questions need to be addressed: How does this specific area of research relate to the wider preoccupations of media sociology? How far does it suffer from weaknesses characteristic of mass communications analysis in general? To what extent does it build upon this wider body of knowledge? And what is distinctive about this area of research? Before these questions can be answered we need to take a detailed look at the wider field. This chapter, therefore, provides a general overview of the main preoccupations of media researchers to date, offering a critical appraisal of the broad theoretical approaches that have been taken. (The methodological critique is discussed more fully in Chapter 4). Although a very wide body of literature is summarised, the review is not intended to be exhaustive.

For present purposes, we can most usefully divide the history of mass communications research into three main periods (McQuail, 1987). During the first stage, from the beginning of the twentieth century until the end of the 1930s, the media were conceived as having a direct and immensely powerful impact. The second period, from the early 1940s until the beginning of the 1960s, challenged earlier notions of unmediated effects and instead focused upon how people use the media. Finally, the third phase, from the 1960s to the present day, has until recently, largely concentrated upon production and content rather than on the effects of the media.

### **SECTION ONE: EARLY APPROACHES**

#### **(i) The Effects Tradition**

The dominant approach towards the study of mass communications from the beginning of the twentieth century until the late 1930's was the European effects tradition which has influenced much thinking on mass communications today. This tradition was closely associated with prominent members of the Frankfurt School. The 'mass society' theorists such as Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer, conceived of the audience as a collectivity of individuals easily manipulated by the powerful elites who controlled the

media. The 'mass society thesis', which reflected the changes taking place in German society under Nazi influence, was later transported to America at the end of the 1930s when leading members of the Frankfurt School emigrated. The theoretical approaches, which were largely speculative, grew out of the fears of eighteenth and nineteenth century cultural and political theorists in Britain, such as Matthew Arnold and J.S. Mill, who saw the development of the media as a threat to elite culture.

A second major influence upon the development of mass communications research was the American effects tradition of the early twentieth century. The American theorists' 'hypodermic model' saw the audience as essentially passive. They conceived of the audience as being injected with messages disseminated by the media and responding in a predictable way. Indeed, the media were seen as being immensely powerful and the intervening group or social structure was seen as having little importance in the communication process. This approach to the media is clearly inadequate, as further research has shown, and is based upon little empirical investigation. It effectively divorced the study of mass communications from the structure of power and influence and treated the audience as though it existed within an historical and social vacuum.

## **(ii) The Uses And Gratifications Approach**

The second period of research into media effects dates from 1940 to the early 1960s. During this period an American school of thought grew up which rejected the mass society theorists' assumptions about the direct and unmediated impact of the media (for example, Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Lazarsfeld and Stanton ed. 1949). The liberal/pluralist approach was largely oriented to the needs of the market and was influenced by the development of social psychology in America. Media effects were investigated in the positivist tradition and measured in a behaviourist framework. There was a strong emphasis upon quantitative analysis of content and upon the functions of the media for society. They aimed to produce predictable results which could be applied in the marketplace.

What has become known as the 'uses and gratifications approach', which includes a host of different strands, challenged the 'hypodermic' model's theory of deterministic effects

and instead focused on how people *used* the media. It marked a significant step forward in the way that the communication process was conceptualised. Thus the audience were rightly viewed as active receptors who were selective about the information that they received from the media. The premises of the mass society theory were rejected and society was seen as being made up of a number of different social groups which acted as a kind of buffer between the individual and the media. Although the liberal/pluralist model assumed that there was an underlying consensus amongst the audience earlier theories of direct, unmediated effects were modified. Also, it rejected the assumption that there was a direct relationship between the content of texts and audience reception. However, researchers still focused upon short term effects; a number of empirical studies (for example, Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954) were concerned with how voters responded to media election campaigns, or with advertising campaigns (for example, Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). The emphasis was largely on individual psychological effects; questions about the political, economic and social structure and organisation of the media were rarely raised. Furthermore, the uses and gratifications approach is largely asocial (cf. Elliott, 1974). Also, it assumes that meanings of texts are more open than they are in reality (cf. Morley, 1980). Although texts are open to a wide variety of interpretations, in practice dominant cultural norms frame the way in which the majority of people make sense of the messages. Indeed, the preoccupation amongst early researchers with the 'needs' of the audience has since been called into question and has proved of little theoretical or methodological value. In particular, the provision of independent evidence to show that specific 'needs' exist is highly problematic. As Elliott observes:

"The difficulty of providing independent evidence for the existence and importance of intervening mental states and processes becomes more acute as they proliferate. The more one aspect of the process has to be used as evidence for another the more the argument becomes circular and unnecessarily complex." (1974:251)

One famous approach within this tradition was Katz and Lazarsfeld's Personal Influence (1955). This, according to Todd Gitlin (1981), has informed a whole 'paradigm', or a set of methodological and theoretical premises relating to the study of society as a whole and of the mass media, within the sociology of mass communications. Katz and Lazarsfeld developed what is known as the 'two-step flow' model. They argued that the effects of the media on the mass audience were minimal, while the social and cultural context in which

communication took place was of great importance. Rather than viewing the audience as a mass of atomized individuals, they recognised that individuals were members of social groups and that responses to the media are mediated through these networks. Thus media were seen as having an indirect rather than a direct influence.

Whilst Katz and Lazarsfeld's model represented an advancement from the early stimulus-response theories, it contains a number of limitations. One serious weakness concerns the fact that the authors' theory was designed to provide a general model of the 'flow of mass communications', though the study was carried out in 1945 before television was widely introduced (cf. Gitlin, 1981). Moreover, important elements of Katz and Lazarsfeld's 'two-step flow' theory are actually undermined by their empirical findings. According to their theory, people were indirectly influenced by the media through opinion leaders, such as local government officials. However, Katz and Lazarsfeld found that 58% of the changes in attitude reported by their survey sample were made without remembering personal contact with opinion leaders and frequently informed directly by media coverage. Moreover, it is highly questionable as to whether one can assess the impact of the media through standard social survey methods (see Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of this issue).

Furthermore, Katz and Lazarsfeld's assumption that there are only two stages in the communication process is problematic; recent research indicates that the communication circuit is much more complex, with several different feedback loops (cf. Johnson, 1986). Indeed, they make a clear divide between active and passive roles but in practice these may be interchangeable (cf. McQuail and Windahl, 1981). Also, Katz and Lazarsfeld fail to acknowledge that the media may still have a direct effect upon the individual; the messages do not have to be mediated by an opinion leader. Finally, they assume that the individual has not been influenced by the media if one can not clearly demonstrate a change in attitude. As Gitlin (1981) argues:

"In this historical situation, to take constancy of attitude for granted amounts to a choice, and a fundamental one, to ignore the question of the sources of the very opinions which remain constant through shifting circumstances. Limiting their investigation, thus, Katz and Lazarsfeld could not possibly explore the institutional power of mass media: the degree of their power to shape public agendas, to mobilise networks of support for the policies of state and party, to condition public support for these institutional arrangements themselves. Nor

could they even crack open the questions of the source of these powers."  
(1981:84)

The critical approach that developed in the sixties rejected the conclusion, drawn by the uses and gratifications approach, that the media have only a limited effect. Once again the notion of the powerful effect of the mass media became popular, though this was based upon very different assumptions to those which had informed the hypodermic model.

## **SECTION TWO: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO MEDIA ANALYSIS**

### **(i) The Critical Tradition**

The third major phase of mass communications research dates from the 1960s to the present day. Whilst the Functionalist perspective dominated the earlier development of sociology, critical theory became increasingly popular during the 1960s and the 1970s. A number of critical approaches to the American effects tradition have been developed by British and European scholars. These perspectives can be broadly located within the Marxist school of thought although they encompass a very wide range of thinking. Rather than being concerned with the question of effects, critical research has been largely preoccupied with the processes of production and content and with the concept of ideology (Fejes, 1984).

Marxist theory on the ideological power of the state became popular in mass communications research during the sixties. The critical school of thought attacked the idea that the media have minimal influence. Marxists and neo-Marxists considered the earlier empirical studies, which supported the notion that the media are of limited influence, to be scarcely worth attention. Theorists such as Stuart Hall (1978) and Stanley Cohen (1972) built their models around the premise that the media play a central role in the reinforcement of ruling-class ideology, although there was disagreement as to the precise nature of the ideological role of the media and their relationship with the wider social structure.

Three main strands have emerged within the critical theory of mass communications; the structuralist approach, cultural theory and the political economy perspective (Curran,

1982). First, structuralist theories of the media have applied Althusser's concept of ideology to the study of semiotics (cf. Althusser, 1965). This approach was most notably associated with Stuart Hall and colleagues, at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, during the 1970s. Clearly, it was a movement forward from the idea that texts mirror reality, but there were tensions between the fusion of the economic determinacy of Marxist theory and linguistic theory about the structure of texts. Cultural theory developed, in part, as a response to structuralism's deterministic assumptions and its failure to consider socio-cultural factors.

Cultural theory, in contrast to structuralism, has focused upon the impact of the wider society on media representations. Cultural theorists (for example, Corner, 1986; Hoggart, 1957; Johnson, 1986; Williams, 1974) rightly view social phenomena as being much more complex than purely determined by the economic infrastructure (cf. Curran et al., 1977). They distinguish between 'public' and 'private' types of cultural production and consumption and suggest that a variety of different 'readings' can be made of texts. For example, Morley maintains:

"To understand the potential meanings of a given message we need a cultural map of the audience to whom that message is addressed - a map showing the various cultural repertoires and symbolic resources available to differently placed sub-groups within that audience. Such a map will help to show how the social meanings of a message are produced through the interactions of the codes embedded in the text with the codes inhabited by the different sections of the audience." (1980:117)

Much of the early work in this field was developed by Stuart Hall. He claims that there are three main codes which people use to interpret media texts (cf. Hall, 1980). First, the 'dominant' code; this is where people accept the preferred reading of the text. Secondly, the 'oppositional' reading; this is where the interpreter challenges the legitimacy of the meanings. And thirdly the 'negotiated' code; this refers to a recognition of the ideological nature of the text but this is unchallenged. This approach towards understanding the production and interpretation of texts is of great value, despite the problems with Hall's use of the concept of 'code' to refer to rather different levels of meanings (cf. Burgess, 1990a; Corner, 1986).

Finally, the political economy perspective represents a reaction against the structuralist position on the primacy of ideology. Researchers such as Murdock and Golding (1977) argue that the media produce a false consciousness which legitimizes the position and interests of those who own and control the media. Thus studies within this tradition have concentrated upon the economic structure of the media and upon production processes (for example, Murdock and Golding, 1974; Halloran et al., 1970). While some studies imply that there is a conspiracy between the media and the state (for example, Garnham, 1981), others are considerably more sophisticated (for example, Murdock and Golding, 1974). However, little work has been carried out into micro relations, such as the relationship between journalists and their sources. As Curran et al. observe:

"... the macro-level at which the 'political economy' analysis is conducted leaves some micro-aspects of this relationship unexplored. In particular, questions concerning the interaction between media professionals and their 'sources' in political and state institutions appear to be crucial for understanding the production process in the media." (1982:20)

Marxist challenges to the liberal/pluralist concept of power partly led researchers to review the role of the media and to recognise the importance of studying media institutions and the actual processes involved in the production of news (for example, Tunstall, 1971; Murdock, 1982; Schlesinger, 1987). This sort of analysis, which locates the media within the wider context of the political structure, without assuming determinism, is one of the most promising recent developments.

One major inadequacy of all three strands within critical communications research, as Fejes has argued, is that they have largely ignored the whole issue of media effects:

"There is an assumption in critical research that the impact of the media is powerful... Thus the focus is away from an analysis of the media effect and more towards an analysis of message content and in the case of critical research, message production. Yet there is a danger that for critical communications research, as with propaganda research, the audience will be regarded as passive. As more and more research is focused towards message content and production, the audience will become more and more invisible in the theory and research of critical scholars. For critical communications research there is a distinct danger of a disappearing audience." (1984:222)

However, in recent years a number of media sociologists have begun to start redressing this imbalance. Interpretativists (for example, Elliott, 1972; Halloran et al., 1970) have focused upon the way in which meanings are interpreted by audiences. They rightly stress the importance of meanings and symbolisation through language, but in concentrating upon the micro level, they tend to divorce the media from structural factors. However, a few more recent studies have combined elements of Marxist theories of the ideological role of the media with empirical studies of the audience (for example, Hartmann, 1979). An excellent study by David Morley, The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding (1980), suggests that audiences do not automatically accept the 'preferred' meaning of texts as Marxist theorists have tended to assume. The situation is far more complex than this, he claims, and several different meanings may be attached to texts:

"The TV message is treated as a complex sign, in which a preferred reading has been inscribed, but which retains the potential, if decoded in a manner different from the way in which it has been encoded, of communicating a different meaning. The message is thus a structured polysemy. It is central to the argument that all meanings do not exist 'equally' in the message: it has been structured in dominance although its meaning can never be totally fixed or 'closed'. Further, the 'preferred reading' is itself part of the message, and can be identified within its linguistic and communicative structure." (1980:10)

Morley rightly argues that the audience should be viewed as being made up of several different social classes and other groupings, and this cultural context influences how they 'read' texts. Discourse analysis has formed a prominent part of his work and increasingly researchers have recognised the value of qualitative techniques in the analysis of the media (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of the methodological problems associated with discourse analysis).

While most recent attempts to conceptualise the audience in Britain have stemmed from critical theory, in America the agenda-setting approach has dominated the field. Since a seminal article by McCombs and Shaw, 'The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media', was published in 1972 in the 'Public Opinion Quarterly', the agenda-setting model has attracted considerable support. However, in the following section it is suggested that there are a number of problems with this perspective.



## **(ii) Agenda-Setting Theories**

A popular approach within current mass communications research has been to view the effects of the media as long-term and indirect. The agenda-setting model claims that whilst the media may not tell people *what* to think, they tell us what to think *about*. Thus it assumes that if the media highlight a particular issue it becomes part of the public agenda, which in turn influences the political agenda. Therefore, the role of the media in selecting which issues to give prominence to and which to dismiss is seen as crucial. A major concern of this thesis has been to move beyond crude formulations of the relationship between the media agenda, the public agenda and the political agenda. The study of the transformation of the environment into a political issue, which will be discussed more fully later on, provides a useful example of the limitations of the agenda-setting approach. For present purposes, however, some of the general theoretical deficiencies of agenda-setting studies will be discussed (the methodological critique is developed in Chapter 4).

A whole number of studies, largely American analyses of election campaigns, have applied the agenda-setting approach to the analysis of a variety of social issues (cf. Shaw and McCombs eds. 1977). In contrast to the earlier effects tradition, agenda-setting theorists have concentrated upon indirect and longer term effects. Agenda-setting studies typically hypothesize that there is a clear relationship between the frequency of media attention which particular issues receive, and their prominence on public agendas. The findings of such studies have been inconclusive, partly stemming from the use of inconsistent methodological frames (see Chapter 4), but also from the fact that they are analysing different social issues. Indeed, variations in the number and nature of the issues studied will form independent factors and affect the outcome of the agenda-setting process (Eyal, 1981). While some studies suggest that newspapers have a stronger agenda-setting effect (for example, Benton and Frazier, 1976; McClure and Patterson, 1976; McCombs, 1977), others have found that there are no significant differences between television and newspapers (for example, McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Agenda-setting studies tend to make ambiguous use of a number of key concepts. For example, they have been inconsistent in their use of definitions of the public agenda, and it is

unclear whether effects are thought to work at the level of the personal agenda or the inter-personal agenda (Eyal, 1981; McQuail and Windahl 1981; Schlesinger, 1988). Also, some studies are ambiguous in their use of the idea of institutional agenda-setting and personal agendas (cf. McQuail and Windahl,1981).

Early agenda-setting studies tended to assert that there was a simple causal relationship between media agendas and public agendas (cf. Schlesinger, 1988). However, recent studies suggest that the hypothesis needs to be developed in order to take account of the complex interaction between social variables. Also, because the model is based upon the assumption that the frequency with which an item is mentioned is a reliable indicator of its position in terms of media priorities, it tells us little about the actual content of the messages (cf. Fejes, 1984). Furthermore, in focusing upon media agendas, agenda-setting studies have tended to ignore the whole process through which social issues are taken up by the media. As Fejes rightly observes:

"If agenda-setting is one demonstrable effect of the media, then the next logical question should be what is the process by which the media's agenda is formulated in the first place. This raises issues of the organisational structure of the media, the role of professionalism, the larger structure of control of the media such as ownership, and the media's relationship to other social and political institutions, all of which mainstream research on agenda-setting ignores." (1984:229)

A few studies have, however, attempted to go beyond the traditional agenda-setting approach which assumes a causal link between the media agenda and the public agenda. Lang and Lang (1981) have developed the concept of 'agenda-building'. Drawing upon an analysis of Watergate, the authors focus upon the issue of how social problems originate on the media agenda and how they are subsequently transformed into political issues. They suggest that there is no simple connection between media coverage and public attention; in order for a social problem to become a public issue people must be able to relate it to the wider political context. Also issues have to compete for space with other objects of media interest. The Langs rightly suggest, then, that the role of the media is primarily to forge links between social issues and the political domain in order for a topic of media and public interest to be transformed into a political issue:

"To create a Watergate issue, the media had to do more than just give the problem publicity. They had to stir up enough controversy to make it politically relevant, not only at the elite level but also to give the bystander public a reason for taking sides." (Lang and Lang, 1981:464)

The process by which this occurs is a complex one and it should be acknowledged that many different variables are involved. A further strength of this approach is that it views the media as a site of competition between sources and suggests that they pursue distinct strategies towards gaining media attention (Schlesinger, 1988). However, further research is needed to examine the process through which agendas are constructed. As Golding maintains:

"The task remains, then, to examine in more concrete detail the processes by which those with privileged access to sources of information distribution and construction 'work' - ideologically, politically, socially. Our understanding of those elite processes is primitive and underexplored, and much more work is necessary to address the issue of agenda-building and the locales of powerful message and ideology creation which prefigure mediation through the communication apparatus." (1990:97)

Information diffusion theory is a further variant on the agenda-setting model which has become popular among American theorists over recent years (for example, Kotler and Kaufman eds., 1972). However, in contrast to traditional agenda-setting theory, information diffusion models pay some attention to sources. Typically, information diffusion studies analyse the information flow from sources to the media, and from the media to the public and political spheres. They share many of the methodological problems associated with agenda-setting, such as a heavy reliance upon quantitative methods (see Chapter 4). Also, they assume that systems analysis is applicable to social phenomena. Indeed, the language used to describe such processes is often couched in Functionalist terms (for example, Strodhoff, Hawkins and Schoenfeld, 1985). Because the communication process is viewed in terms of consensus and functional homeostasis, the model is unable to accommodate conflict and change. Models of information flows developed out of the knowledge-gap hypothesis. The knowledge-gap model seeks to analyse inequalities in the absorption of information from the media. This approach rightly views the audience as a diversified collection of social groupings each bringing different needs and levels of experience and understanding to the text. One of the first proponents of this theory, Tichenor et al. (1970), argued that the

middle-classes tend to more readily absorb information from the media than the lower classes and, in a society which is increasingly information oriented, the knowledge gap between the classes is widened. However, the problem of establishing causal links between media exposure and knowledge levels is severe since one cannot abstract the influence of the media from other social variables.

Agenda-setting theories and information effects models, then, are a useful way of directing attention to the longer-term, indirect impact of the media but they suffer from a number of empirical and theoretical weaknesses. However, agenda-building models are considerably more sophisticated and they offer a promising framework for analysing the communication process from the point at which social problems first attract attention.

### **(iii) Developing A Source-Centred Model**

In the previous section it was suggested that, in attempting to establish a linear relationship between media coverage of particular issues and public opinion, agenda-setting studies generally fail to analyse the process through which media agendas are constructed. As Gandy (1980) argues:

"... studies of the agenda-setting function of the press have tended to treat the mass media in a monolithic fashion, and examine the question of who sets the media's agenda only with great trepidation. Rarely do such studies examine the link between organised efforts on the part of news sources, and their rates of success in managing the flow of the news." (1980:104)

Also, as Gans suggests, several mainstream studies tend to treat the media in an undifferentiated manner. Frequently, television, newspapers and the radio are lumped together in an attempt to develop an ambitious, all-embracing theory of the media (for example, Molotch and Lester, 1974). However, research clearly demonstrates that important differences exist, not just in terms of reception (cf. McCombs, 1977) but also in terms of the production process (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). Moreover, significant differences also exist *within* different media (cf. Anderson, 1991a). And one would also expect to find important differences in the way that sources interact with different media (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). In addition, a number of researchers generalise about the media as though differences between



However, relatively few studies have analysed pressure group strategies from the perspectives of the sources themselves, and where they have paid some attention to this question, analysis has tended to be rather limited. (Davies, 1985; Field, 1982; Gitlin, 1980; Goldenberg, 1975; Greenberg, 1985; Marsh, 1983; McCarthy, 1986; Thomas, 1983; Seyd, 1975 and 1976; Wooton, 1978). Many studies of pressure group strategies have focused upon welfare groups. For example, McCarthy's (1986) study focuses upon the role of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in the policymaking process, particularly relations between government and pressure groups. Some attention is also given to media relations. McCarthy documents the history of CPAG, which was formed in the mid-1960s, under Tony Lynes. He suggests that, under its second director, Frank Field, the group developed a high profile strategy towards publicising poverty issues. Under Field, CPAG's two major tactics were to maintain press attention and to regularly raise questions in the House of Commons. Field adopted a more aggressive approach towards campaigning than his predecessor. He tried to reach a wider audience of interested policymakers and he launched an attack on Labour's record on poverty. According to McCarthy, the decision to embrace this strategy was partly in response to CPAG's lack of success in influencing the Labour Government:

"... the necessity for CPAG to publish Poverty and the Labour Government and to conduct a higher profile media campaign in the early weeks of a General Election run-in, only confirms the group's failure to influence Labour in office and its own exclusion from the official policy community. The 'Poor get Poorer' campaign provides a classic illustration of a cause group having to resort to a dramatic media campaign to compensate, in part, for its own inability to achieve regular and effective consultation" (1986: 136).

By the early 1980s CPAG was competing for public attention with a number of other similar welfare rights groups. McCarthy maintains that the increasing sophistication of these organisations meant that they were all fighting for limited resources. McCarthy observes:

"Greater sophistication among a multiplicity of groups has made it increasingly difficult for each to attract and then sustain resources and publicity for their activities. Welfare rights, social security and the human tragedy of individual cases have far less value in the mid 80s than they did in the mid 70s and mid 60s. In a very real sense the welfare lobby has itself become overloaded with a range of groups preoccupied with and involved in rights issues". (1986: 306-6).

Although McCarthy's study suggests that CPAG became increasingly adept at dealing with the media, there is no indepth analysis of its media strategy. McCarthy documents the way in which information was strategically released or leaked to the press, but fails to offer a comprehensive analysis of source-media relations.

Seyd's (1976) study of CPAG also gives some consideration to its publicity strategy. He notes the emphasis placed upon targeting government and producing factual reports. Also Seyd claims that CPAG's campaign became more wide-ranging during the 1970s with attention focusing upon welfare benefits, housing and income distribution. However, he argues that the campaign enjoyed only limited success during the 1970s because it did not result in major changes in government priorities and public opinion. Seyd maintains:

"... the impact of all this fact-gathering, it must be realised, has fallen on only a very limited number of people. And while CPAG has skilfully used the press, radio and television to develop its case, it has failed to dispel the public myth of welfare benefit recipients as 'scroungers' and 'spongers'." (1976: 194-5).

Although Seyd suggests that CPAG was developing strategies towards gaining further publicity again there is no comprehensive analysis of its tactics towards the media. Similarly an earlier study carried out by Seyd in 1975, which focuses upon the campaign against homelessness run by the pressure group Shelter, provides little indepth analysis of media strategies.

Seyd observes that while CPAG oriented its actions towards uncovering the contradictions of government and administrative policies, Shelter adopted a more personalised approach in exposing the horrors of homelessness and deprived housing. Seyd maintains:

"Whereas the prevailing tone of Shelter's publicity material has been to emphasize the personal and harrowing aspects of poor housing, CPAG's has been more impersonal, laying greater stress upon fiscal and administrative anomalies and contradictions of government policies". (1976: 192)

Shelter was formed in 1966 and its main strategy was to increase public awareness of those who are living in deprived housing conditions. Its director, Des Wilson, was an ex-journalist and experienced in running a public relations campaign. He realised the importance of using the media to publicise the issue and gain money to house the homeless, as well as influence government priorities. The launch of Shelter was aided by the publicity surrounding a television play, 'Cathy Come Home', which was shown at around the same time. As Seyd observes:

"... perhaps Shelters' greatest opportunity to exploit peoples' sympathies arose, from pure chance, as a result of the BBC's showing of a play by Jeremy Sandford entitled Cathy Come Home, which detailed in a quasi-documentary fashion the plight of a homeless family. The play attracted considerable audience attention and proved extremely useful campaign material for Shelter". (1975: 419)

Des Wilson (1984) documents in greater detail how the launch of the campaign was preceded by weeks of research and strategic thinking. Shelter was launched with a major national newspaper advertising campaign and direct mail was distributed to sympathetic organisations. Also, campaigners worked to ensure that media contacts were made in advance, so that there was widespread editorial coverage of the launch. Indeed, from the time the organisation was formed, it has adopted a high profile media strategy.

During the mid 1960s, then, a number of welfare and environmental pressure groups were formed which took a more pro-active approach towards the media. This spawned a number of studies which recorded their history and analysed their success in influencing public opinion and government policy. Most of the studies are insider accounts and are not based upon empirical research. Furthermore, the majority of studies pay little direct attention to source-media relations and do not develop any comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding this aspect of the policy-making process. As Ericson et al. (1989) observe:

"The linkages between journalists and sources in various citizens' organisations remain an under-researched topic. While there have been some excellent case studies ... there is at present no general model for understanding



how the power of these organisations relates to media power and state power". (1989: 262)

Ericson et al. go beyond the dominant approach in providing a more source-centred analysis of pressure groups and the media. In their study of Canadian news-sources in the law and criminal justice field, Ericson et al. interviewed a range of official and non-official groups including citizens' organisations. Their findings suggest that citizens' interest groups were beginning to develop pro-active strategies towards gaining media attention, but some were particularly constrained by resources or credibility problems. Radical or fringe groups claimed to experience particular difficulty in gaining favourable access to the news media. Thus they preferred using highly visual staged events to draw attention to their case, or live coverage. Ericson et al. maintain:

"Some citizens' interest groups experience a combination of not being taken seriously, ideological differences with journalists, and damage to their organisational identities ... the marginal group that does not articulate with a consensual issue is alternatively granted no access, given coverage only in deviant contexts and formats, such as the dramatic public demonstration, and given coverage in other contexts and formats that simply underscore its status as marginal". (1989: 304)

However, research suggests that marginal pressure groups are sometimes able to exert a significant amount of influence. For example, a recent study of news sources and crime reporting found that some of the radical pressure groups were able to influence state definitions, because their views were incorporated by consensual groups with closer links to state institutions (cf. Schlesinger, Tumber and Murdock, 1991).

There are some studies, then, which are beginning to develop a more explicit model for analysing source-media relations. As Schlesinger argues, there are methodological as well as theoretical grounds for analysing the strategies of alternative sources:

"Empirical studies... have failed to investigate the forms of action taken by non-official sources. Although the pressure to develop a more all-encompassing account is obviously at work in the sociology of journalism, the failure to push research beyond its present limits has resulted in a dearth of sustained investigation into unofficial source competition or into the internal organisation of the media strategies of pressure groups. On the few occasions

where this is mentioned, it tends to derive from the journalists' accounts rather than those of the groups themselves." (1990:76)

A seminal study by Stuart Hall and colleagues, Policing the Crisis (Hall et al., 1978), which focuses upon the role the media play in the reproduction of ideology, represents one recent attempt to conceptualise sources. The study illustrates some oversights which may result from adhering too narrowly to a structuralist theory of the media (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). These oversights will be explored in considerable detail in Chapter 3, but for present purposes a brief summary of Hall et al.'s approach is offered.

The basis of Hall et al.'s argument is that 'accredited' sources such as the courts, the police or government officials, enjoy privileged access to the media. They do so by virtue of their powerful position in society, representative status or their claim to specialist knowledge:

"... media statements are, wherever possible, grounded in 'objective' and 'authoritative' statements from 'accredited' sources. This means constantly turning to accredited social representatives of major social institutions - M.P.s for political topics, employers and trade union leaders for industrial matters, and so on. Such institutional representatives are 'accredited' because of their institutional power and position, but also because of their 'representative' status: either they represent 'the people' (M.P.s, ministers etc.) or organised interest groups (which is how the C.B.I. and the T.U.C. are now regarded). One final 'accredited' source is the 'expert': - his calling the 'disinterested' pursuit of knowledge - not his position or his representativeness, confers on his statements 'objectivity' and 'authority'. Ironically, the very rules which grew out of desires for greater professional neutrality, also serve powerfully to orientate the media in the 'definitions of social reality' which their 'accredited sources'- the institutional spokesmen - provide." (1978:58)

Thus, according to Hall et al. powerful sources, which represent key social institutions, are 'over-accessed' by the media. Moreover, they suggest that this necessarily predisposes the media towards presenting their particular definitions of reality, not only when an issue is initially defined as important, but for as long as it commands media attention:

"The media, then, do not simply 'create' the news; nor do they simply transmit the ideology of the 'ruling class' in a conspiratorial fashion. Indeed, we have suggested that, in a critical sense, the media are frequently not the 'primary definers' of news events at all; but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in *reproducing* the **definitions** of those who have privileged access, as of right, to the media as

'accredited sources'. From this point of view, in the moment of news production, the media stand in a position of structured subordination to the primary definers." (original emphasis, 1978: 59)

There are several problems with Hall et al.'s theory of 'primary definers' (see Chapter 3). Fundamentally though, it implies that 'accredited' sources are guaranteed privileged access to the media and that opposing definitions are unable to displace the primary definition. As Schlesinger argues:

"Although it has the advantage of directing our interest to the question of definitional power, it offers no sociological account of how this is achieved as the outcome of strategies pursued by political actors. They do not need strategies because they have guaranteed access by virtue of their structural position. Because this model is blind to the question of source competition, it follows that those dismissively lumped together as 'alternative' are of virtually no interest." (1990:69)

A model needs to be developed, therefore, which is capable of analysing the media strategies employed by non-official sources, as well as official sources. The model also needs to recognise the complexity of the process through which social problems are taken up on the political agenda, without assuming direct audience effects. It should be rooted in an approach which views public arenas as a site of intense competition and recognises the important role which economic factors play.

One of the key concerns of this thesis is to construct such a model of source-journalist relations using the case study of environmental issues, through which a number of broader issues will be addressed. As we shall see, the review of the literature in Chapter 3 indicates that this constitutes a major gap within mainstream production studies. In addition to the strong theoretical grounds for developing such an approach, there are a number of empirical reasons for adopting this perspective, as Chapter 4 will demonstrate.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has suggested that mainstream mass communications research has suffered from a number of general weaknesses or blind spots. Many theorists have assumed that the media have direct effects upon the audience. Also, researchers have tended to treat the media in a monolithic fashion; differences between and within media, and between local and national media, have largely been ignored. Finally, few analyses have been made of the relationship between journalists and sources from a source-centred perspective. However, although the assumption of media power has tended to dominate past research some promising alternative approaches have been developed, such as the models of indirect, long-term effects discussed above. In particular, further work needs to be carried out in the area of agenda-building and source strategies. But how does this apply to the case study of environmental issues? Chapter 3 focuses upon the literature on environmental issues and the media and suggests some further grounds for developing a theoretical model.

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# **Chapter Three**

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## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND THE MEDIA: TOWARDS A MODEL OF SOURCE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES**

### **Section One**

- (i) The Consumption of Environmental News
- (ii) Alternative Approaches

### **Section Two**

- (i) The Production of Environmental News
- (ii) Developing a Model of Source-Media Relations: The Production of Environmental News

## **Introduction**

Despite the evident seriousness of ecological issues, the environment has only recently become a legitimate field of interest for mass communications researchers. Although this topic has interested researchers from a diverse range of disciplines, few comprehensive studies have been made. While mass communications researchers have largely ignored the environment, other social scientists concerned with ecological issues have tended to neglect the role of the mass media (cf. Burgess 1990a). Indeed, although many studies make the tacit suggestion that the media play an important part in the communication of environmental affairs, their precise role remains largely unexplored.

This chapter discusses major theoretical issues raised by the literature on environmental issues and the media (the methodological critique can be found in Chapter 4). It would be convenient if the literature fell into neat compartments, but this diverse body of work is guided by few explicit theoretical models. Indeed, one of the main weaknesses of previous work in this area is that it has been largely atheoretical and ad hoc (cf. Lowe and Rudig, 1986). Nor have researchers generally located their findings within the wider context of mass communications research. Also very little attempt has been made to bring together different insights and approaches from various disciplines (notable exceptions include: Lowe and Rudig, 1986; Burgess and Gold, 1985). Indeed, as Lowe and Rudig point out:

"... the literature is divided between too much uninformed and heavy-handed empiricism on the one hand and too much grand theorising and pontificating on the other." (1986:513)

The literature embraces several areas which include: sociological studies of the media coverage of environmental issues; political studies of environmental pressure group membership, strategies and resources; psychological studies of the composition and values of environmentalists compared with the general public; anthropological studies of the perception of environmental risks; geographical studies of media discourse on landscapes and more general histories of the development of pressure groups and their relationship with local and national government.

Section 1 will review studies that focus upon consumption, and research into media discourse on the environment. First of all the assumptions underlying traditional effects models, such as general opinion surveys and agenda-setting studies, will be discussed. In the second half more sophisticated studies of agenda-building and discourse analysis will be considered, as will culturological approaches.

Section 2 will analyse the literature on production processes and sources. First, traditional approaches towards the study of social movements and the media will be discussed. These analyses fall mainly, though not exclusively, into either the Pluralist or the Marxist schools of thought. It will be suggested that both of these models are, in themselves, inadequate. Finally, the second part will focus upon more sophisticated studies of source-media relations. Having identified the major lacunae in the literature, it will then go on to discuss the ways in which the case study of environmental issues addresses some of these key issues.

## **SECTION ONE**

### **(i) The Consumption Of Environmental News**

#### **Public Opinion and Media Coverage of Environmental Issues**

The majority of work in this area has been conducted within the effects tradition, outlined in Chapter 2. Interest in the media coverage of environmental affairs has generally reflected trends in the wider climate of public concern. In Britain and America, the earliest studies were largely carried out in the 1960s. This interest fluctuated during the seventies and the early eighties (Murch, 1971; Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Sellers and Jones, 1973; Hungerford and Lemert, 1973; Brookes et al., 1976; Molotch and Lester, 1975; Solesbury, 1976; Parlour and Schatzow, 1978; Schoenfeld, 1979; Schoenfeld, 1983; Lowe and Goyder, 1983; Lowe and Morrison, 1984; Howenstine, 1987). However in the late 1980s, when the environment moved to the forefront of the political agenda again, there was a significant revival of interest (cf. Burgess, 1990a).

The large body of, mainly American, research concerning public opinion about environmental issues, suggests that there was a significant increase in public concern about the environment between the mid-sixties and the mid-seventies (see for example, Murch, 1971; Erskine, 1972; Van Liere and Dunlap, 1980; Anthony, 1982). These studies suggest that public interest in environmental issues peaked in the early seventies and began to level off during the mid-seventies, with another wave of public concern occurring during the 1980s. Social surveys have indicated that during the seventies those who tended to be most concerned about environmental issues were the well-educated, the middle-class, the young and those of a liberal political persuasion (Van Liere and Dunlap, 1980; Lowe and Rudig, 1986; Cotgrove and Duff, 1980; and O'Riordan, 1981). More recent public opinion polls consistently indicate that there is now widespread concern about environmental issues cutting across traditional barriers (see Social Trends, Dec. 1988).

Some writers have attempted to develop very broad theories and have suggested that increasing environmental awareness in advanced industrial society represents the emergence of a new ideology which challenges the very basis of the scientific/technical rationale of industrialised society (Cotgrove and Duff, 1980; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Ziegler, 1985; Lowenthal, 1990; Lowe and Goyder, 1983). These theories tend to be ahistorical, generalised and based upon flimsy evidence. Also there is a failure to state what role the media have played in this process, although the implicit assumption of many of these writers is that the media have influenced public perceptions about the environment.

Furthermore, as Lowe and Rudig (1986) have argued, one key difficulty with theories that try and connect post-materialism with environmentalism is the problem of circularity. Did post-materialism create the conditions for the environmental revolution or did the changes in attitudes towards the environment facilitate post-materialism? Further, to view the development purely in terms of a shift in public attitudes disassociates it from the real physical world in which environmental problems are becoming more serious. As Lowe and Rudig argue, in an important overview of the literature:

"One of our main reservations is that this effectively divorces environmental concern from ecological problems. The environment is seen as just one amongst many 'post-materialist' issues which suddenly emerged to prominence



unrelated to any change in the environment, through a shift in values amongst people who had nothing else to worry about." (Lowe and Rudig, 1986:518)

As Lowe and Rudig (1986) rightly point out, these studies tend to be based upon mass opinion surveys on a wide range of generalised environmental issues which are treated unproblematically (see Chapter 4). Attitudes towards the environment are complex and it is difficult to isolate the role which the media have played. Indeed, much attitudinal research has not even considered the influence of the mass media (Lowe and Rudig, 1986). Also it has treated environmentalists as a homogenous mass and has assumed that attitudes determine behaviour. Moreover, attitude surveys have generally been piecemeal and lacking in theoretical insight. As Herberlein argues:

"The literature on environmental attitudes broadly defined is remarkably atheoretical and ad hoc. It neither builds on nor, with several exceptions, contributes to attitude theory." (1981:262)

Indeed, several researchers have concluded that the superficial findings of the majority of public opinion surveys merely reflect the preoccupations of the media at particular points in time (for example, Funkhouser, 1973; Herberlein, 1981; Lowe and Rudig, 1986).

Researchers have frequently attempted to correlate public attitudes towards the environment with trends in media coverage (see for example, Parlour and Schatzow, 1978). Most of the early research into the television audience for environmental topics was in the American social-psychological tradition. It also made heavy use of social survey methods. An underlying assumption of much of the research was that the media have a very powerful influence upon public attitudes towards environmental issues. However, there is little conclusive evidence about the effects of media coverage upon public attitudes towards particular environmental issues.

Indeed, such studies make the assumption that it is possible to demonstrate a direct causal relationship between media coverage and public opinion. However, this approach is too simplistic. It frequently lumps different environmental issues together, and fails to

differentiate between and within media. Also, it fails to take into account other major influences upon public attitudes such as the political arena or the scientific community. As Hansen (1990a) argues:

"A ... fundamental problem with research of this kind, which examines the relationship between media coverage and public opinion and attitudes, is the stilted picture which it conveys of the process of defining the environment as a social problem. More seriously, it fails to account for the way in which social definitions of the environment are elaborated through the continuous interaction between different fora of 'meaning' creation, notably, in relation to the environment, 'science and the scientific community', 'government and Parliamentary politics', 'public opinion', 'pressure group action and rhetoric', 'industry' and of course 'the mass media'." (1990a:4)

Whilst many studies of the media coverage of environmental issues assume direct effects, some researchers have applied the agenda-setting model to ecological issues in an attempt to move beyond the 'uses and gratifications' approach (Downs, 1972; Schoenfeld et al., 1979; Solesbury, 1976; Stringer and Richardson, 1988; Parlour and Schatzow, 1978; Atwater et al., 1985; Protess et al., 1987; Salwen, 1988; Allen and Weber, 1983). These studies have broadly been located within the American liberal-pluralist tradition and have attempted to demonstrate the influence of media coverage on the range of issues that the public are concerned about. Indeed, it should be noted that they reflect the specific character of the American policy-making system.

One of the major problems with assessing this body of work is that the measures which researchers have used have been remarkably inconsistent. As Eyal (1981) has noted, few researchers have attempted to deal with the problem of time-frames. The time-scales of public attitude surveys vary from a couple of days to a couple of weeks. There are also large differences between the time-frames which have been used to assess media agendas. Additionally, time-lags between the analysis of media agendas and public agendas have varied considerably.

A further inconsistency is that studies have focused upon very different combinations of environmental issues. For example, Salwen (1988) analysed the following issues: hazardous substances; quality of water, land and air; wildlife conservation; disposal of wastes

and noise pollution. In contrast Warren's frame included nuclear issues; general and global issues; countryside and agriculture items; air pollution and water and toxics (cf. Warren, 1990). Another problem is some studies analyse environmental issues alongside other competing social issues (for example, Funkhouser, 1973), while others just concentrate on ecological concerns. Also, few researchers have tackled the problem of issue-thresholds; the extent to which the public have had direct experience of an issue and the way in which this may influence their response.

Not surprisingly, the findings of agenda-setting studies on the environment are inconclusive. Some studies have found that the media have a significant agenda-setting effect upon public attitudes towards the environment. For example, a study by Atwater et al. (1985) found that there was a significant, though weak, relationship between the prominence of six environmental issues on the media agenda and public interest in the issues. A more sophisticated study by Salwen (1988) attempted to deal with the problem of time frames and issue-thresholds. Salwen chose to focus upon seven global environmental issues because he hypothesized that the public possessed little direct experience of these problems. A content analysis was made of the front sections of three of the regional and local daily newspapers with the largest circulations in the Lansing district of Michigan, between October 5th 1983 and May 30th 1984. The attitude survey consisted of a random telephone survey of households in the Lansing area over three widely spaced time periods. The study indicated that the public agenda only began to reflect media priorities after coverage had accumulated over five to seven weeks and peaked after seven to ten weeks. Salwen concluded:

"These findings suggest that while audience members may learn about the salience of the news media fare about environmental issues quite rapidly after the outset of news media coverage they tend to regard such issues as salient for some time even after news media coverage decreases... What is being suggested here is that not mere coverage alone, but the continuing endurance of an issue or issues in the news media also determines what the public will think about." (1988:106)

A major shortcoming of mainstream agenda-setting studies in this field is that they have generally failed to broaden their scope to include the wider institutional arena. However, a few studies have focused upon the relationship between newspaper agendas (for example, Gormley, 1975) or television agendas (for example, Protess et al., 1987) and

policymakers' agendas. An important study by Protesse et al. (1987) suggests that television documentary coverage of environmental issues may have a greater influence upon policymakers than on public opinion. The study focuses upon a local investigative television series about the disposal of toxic waste at a Chicago University. Protesse and colleagues carried out a random telephone survey of members of the public and follow up interviews. They found that there was a high degree of journalist involvement with the policymaking elite, and after the programme was broadcast, government agencies took action to ensure that toxic waste disposal regulations were monitored at the University. Protesse et al. conclude:

"The web of influences that affect the policymaking process is intricate and variable, as are the conditions for public attitude formation. Additional case studies are necessary to identify other influential factors, and to build and refine additional models of influence." (1987:184)

These findings are also supported by Pohoryles' (1987) Austrian study of the influence of press and television coverage upon public opinion. Pohoryles' case study of the coverage of nuclear energy issues suggests that media influence policymakers rather than the public.

Although agenda-setting theorists reject the notion of a simple transference of direct effects the model contains significant weaknesses (see Chapter 2). The social survey is an inadequate tool for exploring the complexity of ways in which people interpret environmental meanings (cf. Burgess, 1990a and 1990b; Corner et al., 1990a and 1990b). As Gormley observes:

"... [the model] conceals important differences between newspaper issue emphasis and reader issue emphasis within given issue areas." (1975:306)

Also, theorists tend to assume that the agenda-setting process is broadly the same for different media (see, for example, Salwen 1988). The term 'agenda' is often used in a very loose sense and the distinction between the public agenda, the media agenda and the political agenda is not always made clear. Also, researchers ignore the possibility that the public influence the media agenda (Lowe and Goyder, 1983; Morgan, 1988).

More fundamentally, the character and survival of issues on the political agenda is not solely determined by gatekeepers in media organisations; the activities of non-governmental organisations and official bodies play a key part in managing the news (Gandy, 1980; Lowe and Goyder, 1983; Solesbury, 1976; Stringer and Richardson, 1980). Generally little attention has been paid to the crucial role that sources play in the creation of the agenda and the sustenance of public interest in environmental issues. This is clearly a serious weakness in any attempt to understand the process by which social issues in general come to form part of the political agenda. Indeed, two American studies have suggested that the media tend to *follow* rather than initiate story lines (Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Sachsman, 1976).

Attitude surveys and agenda-setting studies, then, suffer from a number of theoretical and methodological shortcomings. While attitude surveys tend to assume a direct linear relationship between media coverage and attitudes towards the environment, agenda-setting studies tend to assume that one can identify a direct line of flow between media attention to specific issues and the prominence of these issues on public agendas. Moreover, they fail to situate the question of media effects more broadly. How are agendas constructed in the first place? And what role do official bodies and environmental organisations play? Information diffusion models seek to provide a more comprehensive map of this broader process.

### Information Flows

A collection of American studies, informed by models of knowledge diffusion, perceive the mass communication process typically in terms of information flows from sources to the media, and from the media to policymakers (for example, Schoenfeld et al., 1979). A study by Strodhoff et al. (1985) provides a useful illustration of this approach. The authors attempted to develop a model of ideology diffusion concerning environmental matters. They made a random content analysis of two specialist magazines and two general magazines between 1959 and 1979. Strodhoff et al. compared the findings of the content analysis with an independent record of major environmental events during the sample period. They found that the specialist press played a key role in the communication of environmental information. And Strodhoff et al.'s findings suggest that prominent coverage of

environmental issues in special interest magazines tends to precede increases in attention from magazines with a wider readership. Also, the study indicates that cycles of press coverage do not purely revolve around the occurrence of major environmental events (this finding is also supported by Funkhouser, 1973).

One strength of the study is that Strodhoff et al. do not generalise their findings to other media, or to social movements in general. However, their attempt to map the process through which social problems evolve is too simplistic. They assume that the environmental movement evolved through a rational, linear process. Indeed, they acknowledge that:

"... the diffusion of a social change ideology must be recognised as a multi-step flow process involving a series of complex attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioural adaptations and social interactions occurring at a variety of levels through a range of different modes..." (1985:149)

As Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) argue:

"... the idea of an orderly succession of stages is still crude. Many problems exist simultaneously in several 'stages' of development, and patterns of progression from one stage to the next vary sufficiently to question the claim that a typical career exists." (1988:54)

Hilgartner and Bosk go on to make the further point that studies which focus upon a single social problem are unable to explore the dynamics through which social problems compete for attention. This constitutes a major problem since media attention is determined, to some extent, by the perceived legitimacy of other competing social issues.

Furthermore, Strodhoff et al.'s approach is essentially media-centric. The whole question of the media strategies which sources pursue is unexplored. Clearly any analysis of the flow of information from social movements to the mass media should not neglect to consider how sources view their role with the media. Moreover, their model excludes the possibility that media coverage may contain or dissipate potential radical solutions through giving the appearance that a social problem is receiving attention.

Agenda-setting studies, public opinion surveys and information diffusion theories, then, are clearly inadequate in terms of understanding the *wider* process whereby environmental news filters through to the general public and to policymakers. Alternative models indicate that we should consider the broader cultural framework and pay particular attention to source-journalist relations. Although they do not constitute explicit models in the literature, these alternative approaches are referred to here as the culturological perspective and agenda-building theory. First of all, cultural perspectives on the production of environmental news will be discussed.

## **(ii) Alternative Approaches**

### **Culture and the Social Construction of the Environmental News**

Culturological approaches start from the useful premise that media coverage of environmental issues is highly selective. Why is it, they ask, that certain issues (for example, nuclear power) command attention whilst other equally serious topics (for example, rainforests) are relatively ignored? (cf. Hansen, 1991a and 1991b, Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988). One important question raised by agenda-setting studies is which issues are kept off the agenda? Some interesting findings have emerged. Research has indicated that important environmental issues have failed to appear on the media agenda at all (cf. Schoenfeld, 1979; Hansen, 1990b).

For example, Hansen (1990b) made a comparative content analysis of environmental coverage by two major television news programmes, Britain's *9 O'Clock News* and Denmark's *TV Avisen*. Hansen found that the degree of relative attention that the two networks devoted to particular environmental issues strongly reflected economic and industrial factors. For instance, he found that environmental coverage on *TV Avisen* focused largely upon sea pollution, since Denmark's economy is highly dependent upon the fishing industry. In contrast, this issue was given hardly any coverage by the BBC *9 O'Clock News*, a fact explained by the relatively minor role which fishing plays in Britain's economy. Also, while the *9 O'Clock News* concentrated primarily upon nuclear energy issues, not suprisingly, *TV Avisen* gave relatively little space to this topic since there is no nuclear industry in Denmark.

A number of anthropological studies (for example, Douglas, 1975; Douglas, 1985; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Thompson and Wildavsky, 1982; Wynne, 1982) focus, more generally, upon how particular social problems come to be defined as risks. They suggest that pollution beliefs function to maintain social boundaries and to protect vested interests. A study by Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) suggests that our selection of risks is influenced by social values and the way in which different cultures operate. Pollution beliefs, they maintain, often serve to maintain the stability of society. For example, the nomadic Hima people will not let women near the cattle because they hold the belief that women will contaminate the cattle and cause them to die. This belief frees women from working in the productive sphere, so that they can devote their attention to making themselves beautiful. This is important since the Hima men make their wives sexually available to other herdsmen in order to encourage them to share their herds with each other, for there is great pressure on the Hima men to bargain and ensure that they have enough friends around them to work together, rather than establishing rival herds. Thus, Douglas and Wildavsky argue that these beliefs function to control women's sexuality so that men can make their agreements in the productive sphere. But the Hima people also believe that the human population needs to be kept down so that there is enough of their staple food, derived from cattle products, to feed everyone. The number of separate households with child-bearing women is reduced through the practice of old men having sexual access to their son's wives, rather than taking a second wife. Their beliefs, then, function to control reproductive behaviour but also reflect actual physical dangers:

"Their theories of danger, so curious to us, have the triple compulsion: first, they keep apart social categories which they want to keep apart; second, they refer to real dangers, for cows do die and get lost and their milk does dry up; third, there is the metaphorical message that always reminds the men and the women that human reproduction must be kept down." (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982:42-43)

Douglas and Wildavsky maintain that a similar process is at work in modern industrialised society. Indeed, they view the rise of environmentalism in terms of the social control of information and political value-systems. Douglas and Wildavsky claim that traditional American values are being eroded and that concern about environmental issues is being used as a surrogate for a wider attack on these beliefs:



"... the critics of our society are using nature in the same old primitive way: impurities in the physical world and chemical carcinogens in the body are directly traced to immoral forms of economic and political power." (1982:47)

One of the main problems with this type of approach is that whilst theorists provide plenty of examples to demonstrate the selective nature of pollution beliefs in primitive societies, rarely do they offer specific instances relating to the modern, industrialised world. Indeed, they tend to take it for granted that these findings are applicable to modern societies. Moreover, such theories are open to the charge that they cannot be quantifiably verified. Although, as Edelman (1985) points out, symbols cannot be satisfactorily analysed using positivist methods since this would only provide information on attitudes that we have been socialised to hold. We are still left with the problem, however, of demonstrating that the nature of non-industrial society is fundamentally similar to industrial society, even though it is more complex and differentiated.

Furthermore, some cultural studies suggest that we are powerlessly manipulated by symbolic messages transmitted by the media. For example, Beck (1987) argues that Chernobyl awakened a partial awareness of the mass cultural blindness to the destructive effects of nuclear power. He assumes that the media have a very powerful effect but offers no evidence to suggest that this is the case:

"With respect to nuclear and chemical risk, we have been so reduced to media products (insofar as we had not already been so) in the bright glare of our education or ignorance. The disempowerment of our senses forces us into a situation in which we must accept the dictation of centralised information which can at best be relativized in the interplay of contradictions. Even this is of little use, since it only brings to consciousness the generalised lack of knowledge in the face of danger and the extent to which we are at its mercy." (1987:156)

Few studies have taken a cultural approach towards understanding the complexities of the relationship between public attitudes and media discourse on the environment. However, a number of recent studies provide a useful starting point for an exploration of these dimensions (Hansen, 1991a and 1991b; Burgess, 1990a; Corner, Richardson and Fenton, 1990a and 1990b; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; MacGill, 1987). The majority of these studies focus upon nuclear energy and the way perceptions of risks connect with a variety of

ready-made discourses, containing powerful symbolic metaphors. This approach suggests that certain environmental issues receive greater media attention because they resonate with wider cultural values and fears of the unknown. Rather than assuming that media coverage has a direct influence upon public attitudes, they suggest that discourses about nuclear energy interact in a complex way. For example Gamson and Modigliani argue:

"Each system interacts with the other: media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists and other cultural entrepreneurs develop and crystallize meaning in public discourse." (1989:2)

The culturological approach goes some way towards explaining the different styles of discourse concerning the nuclear disasters at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. For example, one of the major ideological frameworks in which the Chernobyl disaster was situated was the myth of the superiority of American over Russian technology (cf. Patterson, 1989). Also, a recent study by Corner, Richardson and Fenton (1990b) included a detailed textual analysis of three documentaries which discussed nuclear energy issues. Corner and colleagues suggest that the rich, symbolic content of texts should not be overlooked. For example, one of the techniques used in the last episode of a BBC documentary, 'Taming the Dragon', which was broadcast in 1987, was to intercut interview sequences with the chairman of the then Central Electricity Generating Board, with strong visual images. Lord Marshall suggested in one of the interview sequences that the problem of nuclear radiation should be viewed in terms of the much greater quantities of radiation, which occur naturally in the environment. He implied that radiation is a natural phenomenon, created by God, thus it does not constitute a great danger. This comment is intercut with a shot of a lake covered in mist, a device used by the narrator to reframe Lord Marshall's comments, and to introduce the issue of radioactive effluent from nuclear power stations. The narrator comments:

"If there's radioactivity in this garden, there's a great deal more of it in this lake. And it's not God but the CEGB that put it there." (Corner et al., 1990b:14)

The culturological approach, then, offers some promising new insights. In particular, it suggests that important cultural constructs are embedded in environmental coverage. Another rather different collection of studies, which address some of the wider issues, are

those which adopt an agenda-building perspective. This body of literature draws upon the traditional agenda-setting model but, unlike the former, concentrates upon news flows from sources to the media.

### Agenda-building and the Media

Some studies have provided a more sophisticated analysis of the process by which agendas are built. They suggest that agendas are constructed through a contest over definitional power. Thus, they rightly view the media strategies of environmental pressure groups as important (Gandy, 1980; Solesbury, 1976; Lowe and Goyder, 1983; Brookes and Richardson, 1975; Lowe and Morrison, 1984; Kelley, 1976; Sachsman, 1976; Molotch and Lester, 1974). For example, Solesbury rightly argues:

"The important part which events can play in the recognition of issues are evidenced in the strategies and tactics of influence which environmental interest groups have characteristically come to use... They have responded typically by the appointment of public relations or information officers to enable them to respond to the needs of the media. But alongside these traditional organisations newer groups with more strategic approaches in influence have developed. They employ a more positive approach to events, in seeking out suitable cases which will serve their purposes, striving to impose on them their view of nature, and generating media interest in them, all as conscious tactics in focusing attention on an issue." (1976:385)

The agenda-building approach, therefore, addresses fundamental questions concerning competition between news sources and source-media relations. As Schlesinger (1988) observes:

"... they... display an awareness of the complexity of the construction of news stories which is altogether missing from the standard agenda-setting approach where content is largely taken for granted. One consequence of this is this is *not* to overrate the media's role, but rather to situate this more broadly." (1988:12)

Agenda-building studies indicate that the communication of environmental affairs involves a series of feedback loops. For example, the way in which politicians see themselves reflected in the media may influence their subsequent behaviour (cf. Richardson and Jordan,

1979; Gregory, 1972). Indeed, a major concern of this study is to extend traditional agenda-building theory in order to develop a model of source-communicator relations.

The agenda-building model has a number of points of connection with the political science literature, which will be discussed in the following section. Much of the work which has been carried out in this area contains the implicit assumption that society is made up of a number of competing groups, with no one interest dominating all of the time. The first part of Section 2 will therefore provide a general outline of this Pluralist perspective and a summary of the Marxist critique. In the second half of Section 2 a more satisfactory model of the production of environmental news will be developed.

## **SECTION TWO**

### **(i) The Production Of Environmental News**

#### ***The Limits of the Traditional Debate: Pluralism Versus Marxism***

The traditional approach towards analysing social movements has been largely the preserve of political scientists. Not surprisingly, they have tended to focus upon the role of pressure groups within the corridors of government, rather than on their influence through the media. The dominant approach among political scientists studying social movements is the Pluralist model. This approach became popular in the fifties and sixties and, to some extent, reflects debates about the American style of government. It was also a period when a host of new pressure groups were formed, including consumer protection and environmental organisations, which adopted a more overt political stance. This was facilitated by the developments in mass communications and the weakening of the political parties as channels of policy development. The Marxist approach became popular among social theorists during the seventies and in recent years the political study of social movements has been underpinned by the debate between Marxism versus Pluralism. What has become loosely termed as the Pluralist approach maintains, in essence, that the existence of a range of pressure groups uphold democracy by balancing various interests against one another. Thus, it is assumed that there must be a general public consensus before any major political change can take place. Pluralists recognise that pressure groups have unequal resources and skills but they suggest that a multitude of factors influence the outcome of policy, and that the



interests; it is assumed that it does not ally itself with any particular interest. However, groups such as the National Farmers Union (NFU) have very close links with the state and exert considerable power over agricultural policymaking (see Richardson and Jordan, 1979).

In contrast to the Pluralist model of power, Marxist theories maintain that the state is the agent of the ruling class in capitalist society; power is concentrated within the hands of those who own the means of production (for example, Sandbach, 1980; Enzenberger, 1974; Morgan, 1988). Whilst Pluralists argue that social reform reflects consensus, Marxists maintain that the state intervenes to accommodate fundamental conflicts of interest in capitalist society. In contrast to the Pluralist notion of equilibrium and consensus in the political system, the ruling-class model maintains that this apparent consensus is achieved through political socialisation, ruling-class ideology or simply the 'dull compulsion of economic life.' For example, Sandbach (1980) has proposed that a 'conflict-accommodation model' should replace Downs' 'issue-attention' model (discussed in Chapter 1). This theory suggests that the opposing interests of the campaigning middle-classes and the interests of capital are accommodated through various legislative means, and although the environmental issue in question may still remain unresolved, it gradually fades from the political agenda. Sandbach claims:

"On the basis of this model one can see that Downs' explanation of the issue-attention cycle ignores the role of the media, conferences, institutions etc. in containing the issue without seriously altering the economic and social relations that are at the foundation of the social order." (1980:36)

However, there are also major problems with Marxist analyses of pressure groups. Marxists such as Ralph Miliband (1969) tend to assume that economic power determines political power but this is not always the case. Although the model does not necessarily imply that the ruling class is wholly cohesive, or that political and economic interests always coincide, it maintains that because the ruling class own the forces and means of production the political system will be largely conducted in their interests. Also, Marxists assume that an elite controls the power structure of every society and that the power structure stays relatively stable over time (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970). Both models of power are, however, 'ideal typical'. That is, they are exaggerated accounts of the workings of the political system and are designed to highlight general features rather than to represent reality (McQuail, 1987).

Indeed, as Schlesinger (1990) has pointed out, these theories of interest groups and the media are not so divorced as is often assumed; they both attribute the media with considerable power in society. The traditional underlying debate in the literature between Marxism and Pluralism, therefore, has become too closed. A more satisfactory model would recognise that this relationship is neither deterministic nor based upon equal competition between interest groups. Structuralists have tended to ignore the role of pressure groups because they have assumed that power is in the hands of the ruling-class. However, the development of a sophisticated analysis of the media strategies of non-official sources, as well as official sources, should become an explicit objective within mainstream research.

**(ii) Developing A Model Of Source-Media Relations: The Production Of Environmental News**

***The Social Construction of Environmental News***

In section 1 we saw how traditional perspectives on the media and the environment were inadequate in terms of understanding the complexities of the reception process. But how do studies which focus on the production of environmental stories fare? Before the literature on source-media relations is discussed we need to consider how representative environmental coverage is of news coverage in general.

A number of studies, mainly concentrating on the press, have analysed the way in which environmental issues are framed by the media (for example, Anderson, 1991c; Burgess 1990a and 1991; Einsiedel, 1988; Hansen, 1990b and 1991b; Morgan, 1988; Warren, 1990). A seminal article by Lowe and Morrison (1984) suggests that environmental coverage is distinctive in a number of important respects. Lowe and Morrison claim that because no established cultural framework exists for reporting environmental topics, there is greater possibility for alternative readings to be made which challenge the status quo. Another factor, they maintain, which distinguishes environmental reporting from other areas of news coverage, is that the subject-matter is regarded as non-partisan. Therefore, Lowe and Morrison suggest, journalists covering environmental affairs tend to possess a higher level of personal commitment to the environmental cause.

Several researchers have also noted that a further distinctive characteristic of environmental coverage concerns the preoccupation with dramatic events such as oil spills and, to a lesser extent, pseudo events such as publicity stunts (for example, Anderson, 1991a; Einsiedel, 1988; Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Sachsman, 1976; Wilkins and Patterson, 1987). Furthermore, they note that environmental coverage tends to be characterised by a strong visual component. However, differences exist between and within media. For example, research suggests that television news makes greater use of such criteria than the press (cf. Wilkins and Patterson, 1987). Of course, other areas of news reporting revolve around events and visualisation, but to a lesser degree. Research, though, has only really *begun* to explore the nature of environmental coverage, and one of the aims of this thesis has been to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the factors which shape environmental news.

While studies suggest that environmental coverage is distinctive in several respects, research indicates that it is *not* dissimilar in terms of patterns of source-use. Research in a number of different countries indicates that official sources, such as government or scientists, are cited by print journalists and broadcasters as primary sources much more often than environmental groups (Einsiedel, 1988; Gandy, 1980; Greenberg et al., 1989; Hansen, 1990b; Morgan, 1988; Wang, 1989; Warren, 1990). For example, a study by Hansen (1990b) of television news coverage of environmental affairs in Denmark and Britain, found that 23% of primary sources were representatives of public authorities, 21% were government representatives, 17% were independent scientists or experts and only 6% were representatives of environmental organisations.

Most studies of source-use have focused upon national media. Indeed, researchers tend to generalise about the media, without considering how environmental coverage by regional and national media differs. However, American and British studies on local newspaper coverage of environmental issues (Molotch and Lester, 1975; Sandman et al., 1987; Spears et al., 1987) suggest that environmental groups may enjoy qualitatively greater access in the regional than the national press, at least for some issues. Research also indicates that the local press devote a proportionately greater amount of space to environmental issues than national newspapers (for example, Molotch and Lester, 1975; Singh, Dubey and Pandey, 1989).



Although production studies have begun to address some important issues in terms of the way in which environmental issues are framed by the media, the structuralist model of source-dependency is clearly needs to be refined. In Policing the Crisis, Hall et al. (1978) argue that powerful 'accredited' sources, such as government departments or the courts, enjoy privileged access to the media (see Chapter 2). Although this approach contains a number of critical blind-spots, it has attracted widespread general acceptance (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). Indeed, some researchers have uncritically applied Hall et al.'s theory of 'primary definers' to environmental coverage (for example, Morgan, 1988). However, a number of points are worth raising.

First, Hall et al.'s theory is time bound. In the example given by Hall et al. reference is made to the Confederation of British Industry and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) as key 'accredited' institutions. While this was clearly applicable in the seventies, since then the structure of access has changed. In particular, over recent years the Trade Union Congress has become less of a major institutional voice in the media. Moreover, the theory is unable to account for the shifts in access which environmental pressure groups, such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, have experienced in recent years. As Schlesinger argues:

"The structuralist model is *atemporal*, for it tacitly assumes the permanent presence of certain forces in the power structure. But when these are displaced by new forces how are we to explain the dynamics behind their emergence? The notion that primary definers are simply 'accredited' to their dominant ideological place in virtue of an institutional location is at the root of this unresolved issue." (original emphasis, 1990: 67)

A second point concerns the failure of Hall et al. to consider instances where the influence of primary definers is not clearly visible, such as 'off-the-record' briefings (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). For example, it is widely known that senior government officials, representing the Department of the Environment, frequently use 'off-the-record' briefings to manage the news (see Chapter 7).

Third, the concept of 'primary definition' implies that there exists a consensus among official sources; it leaves no room for cases where there is a conflict of interest *among* institutional representatives (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). Who then is the primary definer? And

can there be more than one? For example, in the case of the seal virus story there were several different definers seeking primacy (see Chapter 8).

A fourth problem with Hall et al.'s theory is that it cannot account for inequalities of access among the 'accredited' sources themselves (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). Clearly, there are times when some actors enjoy much more privileged access than others. For example, some environmental campaigners have established such a favourable relationship with media, that they become consistently over-accessed, while other campaigners may experience considerable difficulty in securing such access (see Chapter 7).

Fifth, Hall et al. assume that primary definitions always originate from the political system. However, as Schlesinger (1990) points out, there are cases where media act as primary definers through challenging institutional representatives and causing them to respond, or through developing themes which 'accredited' sources later adopt. For example, The Daily Mail 'Save Our Seals' campaign influenced back-bench Conservatives to pay greater attention to environmental issues (see Chapter 8).

Finally, the approach fails to take into account the varying degrees of legitimacy with which media judge the claims of primary definers (see Chapter 5). This failing partly stems from too close an adherence to quantitative methods of analysis. Indeed, a more qualitative approach reveals that credibility is an important factor.

The notion that 'primary definers' necessarily secure advantaged access to the media, then, is not without its problems. However, as Schlesinger argues:

" ... it is necessary to propose that we conceive of sources as occupying fields in which *competition for access* to the media takes place. But in which material and symbolic advantages are unequally distributed. But the most advantaged do not secure a primary definition in virtue of their positions alone. Rather, if they do so, it is because of successful *strategic action* in an imperfectly competitive field... Thus, while we may certainly accept that the state dominates institutional news coverage, this does not render irrelevant questions about differently endowed contending groups in the building and modification of political agendas." (original emphasis, 1990:77)

## *The Classification of Environmental Organisations*

In developing a model of source-media relations we need to, first of all, develop an explicit classification of environmental organisations. A large body of literature discusses the problem of defining and classifying social movements (for example, Alderman, 1984; Grant, 1989; Jordan and Richardson, 1987; O'Riordan, 1979; Wooton, 1978). Much space has been given to this discussion but it lacks theoretical substance and has not proved very useful in practice. Several different classifications of pressure groups have been made (cf. Allison, 1975). Social movements have been categorised according to size; to financial security; according to whether they are consumer or producer groups; according to whether their membership is open or closed; according to the degree to which they are politically partisan; according to whether they are multi-purpose or single issue groups; according to whether they are permanent or ad hoc; according to whether their internal structure is oligarchic or democratic; according to how active they are; according to whether they are associational or institutional; according to whether their strategy is open or focused; according to their status as legitimate and according to whether they perform a lobbying or service function.

What is immediately apparent is that there is a great deal of overlap between and within these categories. For instance, some environmental pressure groups provide both a lobbying and a service function. In practice it is difficult to fit many groups into these classifications and a complex system of categorisation may actually result in groups being forced into categories which do not exist in reality. More fundamentally, these categories are static whilst in practice the nature of pressure groups and their activities are in constant flux. For example, whilst a pressure group might have started out by pursuing an open strategy it may well later take on a more focused strategy (cf. Kimber and Richardson, 1974). Indeed, this observation led Jordan and Richardson to state that:

"Our main conclusion... is that no coherent category of 'pressure group' is identifiable. And whenever the appropriate boundaries are drawn they are not likely to follow superficial characteristics, such as being membership based or not." (1987:290)

There are problems with even the most basic classification of pressure groups such as the distinction between *sectional* and *promotional* groups. Sectional groups are organisations which attempt to protect the interests of a particular section of society, whilst promotional groups are organisations that campaign for a particular set of causes. Many pressure groups do not clearly fit into one category or the other. Examples of environmental groups which do not fit into either group include: the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection, the Civic Trust, and the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). These groups represent the interests of a particular section of society and also support particular causes.

Additionally, some promotional groups are closely allied with sectional groups. For example, Transport 2000 has close links with the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), and exists to support their interests to some extent. Also groups which appear to be promotional may also be sectional groups that are trying to conceal their vested interests in a particular cause. An example cited by Jordan and Richardson (1987) is a Scottish environmental group that appeared to be financed by oil companies who were worried about their competitors.

There are also difficulties with distinguishing between quasi-official bodies, such as the Nature Conservancy Council and non-official bodies such as the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection. For example, groups such as the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection are not given official status and yet they have very close links with the Department of the Environment, from whom they receive some of their funds.

Therefore, in view of the problems that are associated with complex typologies of pressure groups, the most useful classification of these groups is Potter's (1961) promotional/sectional categorisation, although it should be acknowledged that this is not without problems. There is a clear difference between interest groups which exist *primarily* to protect the interests of a section of the community and promotional groups which are concerned with campaigning about a particular cause or set of issues. Within the category of promotional groups, there is also a divide between those organisations which engage in

pro-active campaigning (for example, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace) and those that engage in campaigning activity in a more reactive way (for example the National Trust). Pressure groups that emerged in the late sixties and early seventies such as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, have taken on a very different approach to that of older organisations and have recognised the need to maintain close links with government, to employ full-time professional employees and to develop strategies towards gaining media attention (Alderman, 1984; McCarthy, 1986).

Political scientists have largely been concerned with the classification of pressure groups and with analysing their general role in the political system. However, they have generally ignored the inner structure of environmental pressure groups. As Lowe and Goyder observe:

"The overriding concern has been to assess the impact of groups on the political system as a basis for moral judgement as to their worth or threat to democratic government. There has been a tendency to regard as unproblematic the way groups arise, generate support and commitment, establish objectives, and evolve administrative and decision-making structures." (1983:2)

In the next sub-section it will be suggested that the literature needs to address fundamental questions about the internal character of environmental organisations and their relationship with the media.

### *Social Problems, Social Movements and the Media*

Although there is a large, rather diverse, literature on the 'natural history' of social movements few comprehensive analyses of source-media relations have been made (for example, Killan, 1964; Mauss et al. 1975; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). On the whole the study of social movements and mass communications has been approached from a media-centred perspective (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). Moreover, much of the work in this area has been ad hoc and few explicit models have been constructed.

Broadly two main approaches have been taken in the literature; there are those studies that have taken the *internal* approach, eg. Wilson, 1984, and those that adopt the *external* approach, eg. Dawkins, 1987. The internal approach is concerned with the inner structure and workings of environmental groups. Studies which fall into this category discuss factors such as the internal decision-making structure of pressure groups; the amount of resources held; public relations activities; the degree of co-operation or conflict between related interest groups and relations between environmental groups and government.

In contrast to this the external approach, typically adopted by political scientists, analyses the social movements in the policy-making process carried out at the level of local and national government. This often involves an analysis of the factors which lead some pressure groups to influence politicians and the governmental structures that facilitate or prevent this. Although these are the two main perspectives which have been taken there is a large degree of overlap. Some writers combine both approaches in their analysis of the environmental movement (for example, Lowe and Goyder, 1983).

Although now rather dated, Lowe and Goyder's (1983) study is the most comprehensive survey of environmental groups, and their relations with government and the media, to have been conducted in Britain. Lowe and Goyder conducted a questionnaire survey of the views of representatives of seventy-seven national, voluntary environmental organisations between 1979 and 1980. In addition to this, they made case studies of the following environmental groups: the Henley Society; the National Trust; the Royal Society for Nature Conservation (RSNC); the European Environment Bureau and Friends of the Earth.

Lowe and Goyder found that 59% of the groups in their survey said they had received television coverage, although they could only remember their views being aired once or twice. An even higher number, 74%, claimed that they had received radio coverage and only 9% of the organisations surveyed had received no media coverage at all. Newspapers, particularly the quality press, were considered the most accessible medium.

Lowe and Goyder's study suggests that the mobilisation of resources is fundamental to an environmental organisation's success. Resources may include finance, labour, expertise, facilities, sanctions or legitimacy. Several researchers have noted the economic relation between journalists and sources (Gandy, 1980; Gans, 1980; McCarthy and Zald, 1976; Sigal, 1973). This partly explains the tendency for media to heavily rely upon official, institutionalised sources, who generally possess greater economic power. As Gandy suggests:

"...information subsidies of journalists and other gatekeepers operate on the basis of simple economic rules. Journalists need news, however defined, and routine sources are the easiest ways to gain that information." (1980:106)

Evidence suggests that credibility is another key factor which influences source-media interactions (cf. Gans 1980). Sources must be viewed as legitimate and authoritative, if they are to attract sustained favourable media attention. Greenberg (1985), in one of the few studies to focus upon the tactics pursued by environmental non-governmental organisations, suggests that Friends of the Earth have worked to build up a distinctive, credible image:

"What makes FOE so unique is that the organisation combines a strong research commitment with its attention-getting tactics. This decision to combine research and media events was made when the organisation was founded because it was felt in order to have credibility and sustain its influence, independent of the publicity it generated, FOE had to show that the issues had been seriously thought through and that viable intelligent options to prevailing policies were available." (Greenberg, 1985:356)

Also, as Kielbowicz and Scherer note, journalists tend to favour sources in close geographical and social proximity:

"... journalists prefer to obtain their information from those who can speak authoritatively on a subject. In addition, sources in close proximity to journalists, physically as well as socially, are most likely to be used for information than distant ones." (1986:76)

Finally, a satisfactory model of source-media relations should consider the extent to which sources compete or co-operate with one another for media attention. Although there are a number of problems with resource mobilisation theory (see Chapter 10) it is worth noting that:

"... social movement organisations have a number of strategic tasks. These include mobilising supporters, neutralising and/or transforming mass and elite publics into sympathizers, achieving change in targets. Dilemmas occur in the choice of tactics, since what may achieve one aim may conflict with behaviour aimed at achieving another. Moreover, tactics are influenced by inter-organisational competition and co-operation." (McCarthy and Zald, 1976:1217)

The literature on social movements, then, though offering some useful starting points, provides us with a rather fragmented picture of source-communicator relations. Neither pluralism nor structuralist theory offers an adequate model of source-journalist interactions. Thus, a primary aim of the empirical study has been to explore the contesting definitions of key actors in the environmental field and their relations with the media.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The review of the literature has shown that work in this field has tended to suffer from a number of general defects. First, researchers have tended to make assumptions about the nature of audience effects based upon superficial evidence. Frequently writers have attempted to demonstrate linear relationships between public opinion and media coverage of environmental issues, without paying due recognition to the complexity of public attitude formation. Second, a number of researchers have tended to treat the media in an undifferentiated manner. They have lumped media together and assumed that the production and consumption of environmental news is broadly similar across the media. Third, a related point concerns the tendency to generalise about media coverage from studies of national media, without exploring how regional media coverage may differ. Finally, the relationship between sources and journalists remains under conceptualised. Few comprehensive studies have focused upon source-media interactions; and where theorists have considered the role of sources, this has tended to be from a media-centric position.



These weaknesses are, in general terms, reflected in the broader traditional literature on mass communications outlined in Chapter 2. Mainstream research concerning environmental issues, particularly American work, has largely built upon agenda-setting and information diffusion models. However, with some exceptions, a distinctive feature of research on the media and the environment is that it offers us few explicit theoretical models. Although a pluralist model of power underlies much of the work on the environmental movement and the media, rarely are the theoretical issues addressed.

This study, then, takes a significant departure from traditional analyses of the production of environmental news. It recognises that the media are only part, though an important part, of the complex network of influences upon environmental policymaking. The study suggests that the agenda-building model offers the most promising theory in terms of developing a model of the complex linkages between the political arena, the media and the public. Further, it suggests that a major lacuna exists within mainstream production studies. Our knowledge about the precise nature of sources-media relations is rudimentary. Through focusing upon the case study of environmental issues and the media, a theoretical model that identifies some of the key features which characterise source-communicator interactions is developed.

Mainstream research on the media and the environment also suffers from a number of methodological weaknesses. The following chapter will provide a critique of traditional approaches. It will suggest that there are methodological as well as theoretical grounds for developing an externalist model.

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# **Chapter Four**

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## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES**

### **Section One: Textual Analysis**

- (i) Content Analysis
- (ii) Discourse Analysis

### **Section Two: Analysis of Producers and Consumers**

- (i) Quantitative Approaches
- (ii) Qualitative Approaches

### **Section Three: The Present Approach to Methodology**

- (i) In-depth Interviews
- (ii) Case Studies

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a general review of the major methodological approaches which have been used in mass communications research to date. In the light of this broader discussion, a detailed analysis of the methodological approaches used in this study is made. It provides further evidence of the value of qualitative analysis in sociology. More specifically, the chapter suggests that qualitative methods such as interviews and observation are particularly appropriate for the study of media coverage of environmental issues, given the complexity of meanings associated with the environment. Furthermore qualitative methods, in contrast to quantitative methods such as the content analysis of media texts or social surveys, can uncover latent meanings within media discourse and the taken-for-granted assumptions of journalists covering environmental issues (MacMillan, 1988). Researchers should seek, where possible, to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Section 1 considers ways of studying media texts. First, content analysis is discussed and then alternative forms of interpretative textual deconstruction, such as discourse analysis, are considered. Section 2 focuses upon ways of analysing the producers and consumers of media texts. Here a critique of traditional social survey methods is offered, which leads into a discussion of qualitative methods, such as case studies, observation, in-depth interviews and discussion groups. Finally, Section 3 outlines the methodological approach taken here.

## **SECTION ONE: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

### **(i) Content Analysis**

Content analysis is an established research technique within mass communications research. Content analysis has been widely used by researchers to study how a range of issues are treated in media texts (for example, Halloran et al. 1970; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980 & 1982 ; Morley, 1976; Hartmann, 1979; Manstead and McCulloch, 1981; Schlesinger, Tumber and Murdock, 1991). Content analysis has also been frequently used to study environmental coverage by newspapers and television (for example, Funkhouser, 1973; Brookes et al., 1976; Salwen, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Hansen, 1990b; Warren, 1990). Content analysis uses pre-determined categories in order to measure the

frequency with which particular characteristics appear in texts, and the amount of space devoted to them. Holsti provides the following definition:

"Content analysis is any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages". (1969:14)

It assumes that the study of the manifest text is significant; that one can make inferences upon the basis of an analysis of the manifest content and that the frequency with which particular themes occur is meaningful (Holsti, 1969). Positivist approaches suggest that one can uncover the objective reality of the social world through studying human behaviour, as a natural scientist might study natural phenomena, by establishing causal relationships through the application of statistical measures. R.G. Burgess defines positivism as:

"An approach to sociological explanation which emphasises that social sciences should be like the natural sciences, by identifying facts in the social world, and causes of social phenomena through objective scientific study". (1982:141)

This strand of philosophical thought was very influential and inspired a whole tradition of empirical sociological research. Indeed, it was not until the mid 1960s that positivist theories began to lose some of their grip in legitimising social science disciplines. Content analysis is a useful way of measuring the amount of attention given to particular themes in media texts. It enables the researcher to identify important characteristics of manifest content. However, a review of previous content analyses of environmental coverage illustrates some of the problems associated with this technique.

A small number of content analyses have been made of the UK national press coverage of environmental issues. The first study in this field was carried out by Brookes et al. in 1976, who made a content analysis of issues of The Times, selected at four year intervals between 1953 and 1973. The authors' aim was to assess the amount of non-advertising space (display and classified) devoted to environmental affairs as a set of 'interrelated issues'. They found that the amount of space stayed relatively constant between 1953 and 1965, and even between 1953 and 1973 it only increased by twenty-eight percent. The most marked increase was between 1965 and 1973 when the coverage increased by two

hundred and eighty one percent. However, this may reflect, to some extent, journalists' inclusion of different topics within the bracket of environmental news during this period.

However, as Sandbach (1980) has argued, the study was not comprehensive enough to test adequately the hypothesis that the environment, as a set of interrelated issues, had risen up the political agenda due to increased press coverage. The results were not able to show whether there had been a significant increase at any particular time or whether this was followed by any subsequent decline. Indeed, Brookes et al. admit that their study was based upon a weak methodology and they warn that their findings should be treated with caution:

"We recognise that our analysis was fairly crude in using a four year interval and twelve copies per annum..." (1976: 252)

Part of the problem, when trying to assess the growth of environmental coverage through content analyses, is that researchers have used a wide range of different definitions of environmental issues and therefore it is difficult to compare their findings. These definitions have either tended to be very wide, historically bound or a combination of the two (cf. Hansen, 1990b). For example, Brookes et al.'s definition encompasses:

"... all aspects of pollution, relevant planning matters, urban and rural amenity and landscape questions etc., and also... broader ecological concerns relating to population, resource depletion and the conservation of wildlife." (1976:246)

This is a wide definition which encompasses both local and global interests and very different aspects of environmental concern, such as conservation and environmental risk. Indeed, Van Liere and Dunlap warn:

"... researchers should reconsider the practice of lumping together such diverse issues as air and water pollution, population control and wildlife protection together into global measures of environmental concern." (1980:193-194)

A rather narrower definition of the environment was employed by Funkhouser (1973). His definition included: air pollution, water pollution, ecology and matters relating to environmental policy (population issues were considered under a separate category). Other

researchers have focused upon particular aspects of environmental concern such as energy conservation (for example, Allen and Weber, 1983) or nuclear power (for example, Spears et al., 1987).

Another problem, when attempting to assess shifts in media attention over time, is that researchers have generally restricted their analysis to sections of the quality press. The study by Brookes et al. made generalisations upon the basis of an analysis of The Times. Brookes et al. failed seriously to consider the fact that The Times reflects the political and ideological views of its staff and readership. Indeed, it is questionable as to whether one can generalise about press coverage of environmental issues on the basis of a small study of one national, quality newspaper. As Sandbach (1980) argues, it is also questionable to assume that The Times is a reliable indicator of the level of public concern about environmental issues.

More recent UK studies of national press coverage of environmental affairs have adopted more sophisticated methodological approaches. For example, Warren (1990) carried out the first UK content analysis of environmental coverage to include tabloid newspapers. She looked at aspects of environmental coverage by The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Mirror and The Sun between January and June 1985, January and December 1988 and January and June 1989. Warren found that the quality press and the popular press generally tended to report different sorts of environmental stories. For example she found that, during the sample period, The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph covered the Inquiry into whether a further nuclear pressurised water reactor should be built at Hinkley Point in Somerset, whilst The Mirror and The Sun ignored it.

However, there are a number of difficulties and limitations associated with the research technique. One of the drawbacks of content analysis is that it is a tedious and time consuming method. Also, there is the problem of fitting material into pre-determined categories. More fundamentally, content analysis assumes that the frequency with which certain characteristics appear provides a reliable indicator of their significance. Also, it

assumes that the messages contained in the text are not open to a variety of different readings. Livingstone suggests:

"... clear biases in the manifest programme content may not be mirrored in viewers' own representations of the programme. Content analysis assumes that all the potentially effective messages are in the text and have now been revealed through analysis, so that all the viewers can 'do' with this content is take it or leave it." (1990:24)

Indeed, as Burgess maintains:

"The use of content analysis to classify and measure information in media texts raises many difficulties - not the least of which is how to determine the nature of 'environmental issues'... Content analysis fractures media texts and works on the assumption that the number of times an item appears is an accurate measure of its importance. The method assumes that the meaning of the message is manifestly transparent - not open to different interpretations, and that all readers will understand the item in the same way." (1990b:10)

Furthermore, although some theorists (for example, Holsti, 1969) claim that content analysis is an objective method of analysis, a great deal depends on the interpretation of statistical relationships. McQuail (1977) prefaces the Royal Commission's Report on the Press with the caution:

"... [the categories] represent only one set out of a range of possibilities. They are somewhat arbitrary, chosen for the purpose in hand in the belief that they can convey something about the press which reflects the way newspapers are put together and read. Their meaningfulness depends entirely upon convention and current usage and there is no objective or neutral way of deciding which categories should be used." (1977:2)

And as Siedman maintains:

"... few have questioned the inherent subjectivity of quantification which requires 'selection' of parameters and baseline data, the interpretation of findings, and selection of facts and evidence. There is much to be gained by destroying the myth of objectivity since subjectivity is always intricately involved - but disallowed." (cited by Walker, 1985:13)

As with all methods, the chosen categories reflect the particular biases and interests of the researcher and there is no neutral way in which they can be classified. Furthermore, content analysis assumes that one can use the same categories to measure the content of a range of newspapers which may use their space very differently (McQuail, 1977). Finally, one cannot reach any conclusions about audience effects through using this method.

However quantitative content analysis is a valuable method of research when supplemented with qualitative analysis of media texts. Rather than placing emphasis on measuring the frequency of categories, qualitative analysis focuses upon the context in which those categories acquire meaning.

## **(ii) Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is an exciting new development within mass communications research. It emerged (within the cultural studies tradition) partly as an attempt to reconceptualise the audience and to overcome some of the shortcomings of content analysis (cf. Burgelin, 1972). Discourse analysis developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is not just a methodological approach; different theoretical assumptions shape its various forms. The development of discourse analysis was closely associated with the rise of structuralism, particularly the French semiotic school. It also has links with linguistics and anthropology; conversation analysis; the sociology of scientific theory; the social psychology of rhetorical structures and cultural theory. However, discourse analysis is not simply an amalgam of all these different influences; there are several different 'branches' of thought. As Potter and Wetherell observe:

"Perhaps the only thing all commentators are agreed on in this area is that terminological confusions abound. The problem arises because developments have been happening concurrently in a number of different disciplines (psychology, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, literary studies, philosophy, media and communication studies), using a panoply of theoretical perspectives" (1987: 6).

A great deal of discourse analysis is lumped under the general heading of 'cultural studies' when, more accurately, it should fall under the heading of literary analysis. Within 'cultural studies', discourse analysis looks at the way meanings are constructed in media texts



through language and imagery (for example, Morley, 1980). It draws on European critical theory, semiotics and interpretivism, while content analysis developed alongside the American effects tradition. Much of the recent work that has been carried out within 'cultural studies' focuses upon television programmes as texts. Livingstone maintains:

"If we regard television programmes as texts rather than stimuli, we can accommodate their complexity more readily, expecting them to be multi-layered, subject to conventional and generic constraints, open and incomplete in their meanings and providing multiple yet bounded paths for the reader". (1990: 189).

This form of textual analysis is essentially concerned with the wider frames of reference, or socio-cultural context, of media texts. The text is analysed as a whole unit rather than in terms of particular characteristics. As Burgelin (1972) observes:

"The prime object of interest for research in this area is not the purely linguistic properties of the messages conveyed by the mass media, but rather in a more general sense, the meaning of their messages, and the universe which they constitute" (1972: 315).

Much of the recent work in 'cultural studies' has developed from the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Stuart Hall's (1980) 'encoding/decoding' model has been a starting point for many studies. Hall suggested that media texts are composed of complex ideological meanings through verbal and visual signs. He suggested that there are three systems of codes or rules which can be identified in media texts: the 'primary' code, codes of meaning and the political code. In brief, producers use a variety of linguistic and visual means in order to position audiences so that they interpret the meanings of the text in the ways intended.

One of the major advantages of this approach to conversation analysis is that it relates the micro to the macro. It connects the interpretation of wider questions to do with ideology and power. In recent years this form of analysis has become increasingly popular among mass communication researchers. Discourse analysis of media texts is often combined with audience reception studies (for example, Corner et al. 1990b). Indeed, a small number of excellent studies of environmental discourse have been made (Burgess, 1991; Corner, Richardson and Fenton, 1990a and 1990b; Silverstone, 1983). Silverstone's work, on the



communications research. Though the quantitative critique would question the reliability of such methods because small numbers of the audience discuss the text, we can build up a wider picture through combining a series of case studies (see Chapters 8 and 9).

Another collection of approaches have developed alongside linguistic theory (for example, van Dijk, 1988 and Fowler, 1991). This version of discourse analysis focuses upon the linguistic features of texts such as rhetorical forms, coherence between sentences and the thematic organisation of news stories. This branch of discourse analysis is influenced by structuralism and anthropology. It is interested in how people make sense of the world and how this is reflected in language. Furthermore, it links the micro aspects of public discourse with macro structures. For example, van Dijk (1988) argues discourse analysis can reveal the ideologically based perspectives of journalists or newspapers through unveiling the way in which particular categories are given prominence and the way in which sentences are structured:

"Only when we know exactly how the social cognitions of journalists are acquired, structured, applied to the understanding and representation of news-gathering situations and interactions, other media texts, and other texts that define their sources, and affect the actual writing process are we able to specify how the social organisation and ideologies of news production may count as objective conditions of news reports as social and cultural products". (Van Dijk, 1988: 30).

This recognises the ideological basis of environmental discourse. Journalists are presenting us with a particular way of viewing the world or, put another way, they are placing their own structure on reality.

Van Dijk makes a series of case studies of national and international news in the press. This approach closely approximates literary analysis, although it does connect with issues of power and ideology.

A similar perspective is adopted by Fowler (1991), a Professor of English and Linguistics, who draws upon 'critical linguistics'. According to Fowler critical linguistics recognises the inherent ideological positioning of language:

"... critical linguistics simply means an enquiry into the relations between signs, meanings and the social and historical conditions which govern the semiotic structure of discourse, using a particular kind of linguistic analysis" (1991: 5).

Fowler is interested in the relationship between social contexts and linguistic form. News is a social construction and reflects ideological positions. He maintains:

"News is a representation of the world in language; because language is a semiotic code, it imposes a structure of values, social and economic in origin, on whatever is represented; and so inevitably news, like every discourse, constructively patterns that which it speaks. News is a representation in this sense of construction; it is not a value-free reflection of facts" (Fowler, 1991: 4).

Through adopting a case-study method, Fowler analyses the way in which newspaper discourse frames reality. Among the news stories considered are the salmonella-in-eggs scare, the American bombing of Libya and the problems of the National Health Service. He suggests that each style of news commentary has its own peculiar discourse, for example scientific reporting or political interviews. This approach is potentially very useful (see Chapters 8 and 9). It differentiates between the different 'modes of discourse' adopted by newspapers and explores the way in which this may contribute to a consensual ideology. Furthermore, Fowler's work suggests that the style of language in the national press is flavoured with official ideology, given journalists' tendencies to rely upon official sources on a routine basis. He claims:

"The fact that the newspapers are full of such reports means that they contain a lot of discourse in a prestigious and official public style. But the influence and imbalance in accessed voices goes further than that. Many parts of newspapers which seem to be not quotation of official voices, but, rather, written articles for which the editor or a named journalist, seeks to take responsibility, are tinged with an official ideology because they are written in the formal, authoritative style which accessed figures such as politicians or experts habitually use". (1991: 22-23).

A further collection of approaches have developed within social psychology (see for example Billig, 1991; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). These researchers argue that we need to go beyond the traditional agendas of psychologists, who tend to view cognitive and social psychology as separate camps. They view discourse as a

social construct which is functional for the individual. Rather than viewing discourse as merely a reflection of an individual's underlying cognitive state, they see discourse in terms of an individual's orientation towards social action:

"It is a central feature of discursive psychology that it treats both external reality and mental states as participant's concerns: not as psychologically prior phenomena; as inputs or explanations of talk's content, but rather phenomena that are themselves open to constructive description and implication, by participants, as parts of discursive actions" (Edwards and Potter, 1992: 10).

Discursive psychology suggests people's views are contradictory; a mixture of reality and imagination, fact and reason. Language patterns reflect this complexity; they are complicated and function in a variety of different ways. Billig observes:

"By paying close attention to the use of language, discourse analysts have shown that people do not have a single 'attitude' in the ways that social psychological theory has often assumed. Instead, people use complex and frequently contradictory patterns of talk; they will use different 'interpretative repertoires' to accomplish different functions" (1991: 15).

This approach, then, departs from traditional attitude theory. It recognises the essential contradictory nature of thought, language and speech. As Billig maintains:

"Although there are theoretical differences between the various critics, there is general agreement that the topic area, which has been traditionally occupied by attitude research, should be radically reconstructed. At present such a reconstitution is only just beginning. A number of discourse studies have revealed that people express their views in much more complex ways than would be preferred by traditional attitude theory" (1991:169).

In contrast to some of the approaches discussed earlier, discursive psychology focuses upon the *social organisation* of texts, rather than their linguistic structure. 'Texts' could include newspaper reports; interview transcripts, transcripts of courtroom proceedings or scientific papers. In particular, Edwards and Potter (1992) are interested in the ways in which a factual 'objective' report is constructed. How are controversial subjects framed as 'objective' accounts of reality, rather than emotional testimonies? How is discourse rhetorically organised? And how is coherence maintained in building up an argument? Through analysing national and press coverage of a series of political controversies, Edwards

and Potter identify a number of different mechanisms which govern the rhetorical organisation of language.

Similarly, Billig (1991) explores a series of case studies of rhetoric including: everyday views about the monarchy; the nature of prejudice; and the involvement of ideology in fascist propaganda and the views of young Conservatives. Billig concludes that public discourse is full of arguments and counter-arguments and people's views are full of variations.

Although Billig suggests rhetoric and argumentation underlie *all* social life, this model is particularly useful when applied to legal or scientific discourse (see Chapters 8 and 9). For example, scientists can be shown to employ a number of discursive strategies to dismiss theories which do not fit into their world view. Similarly, cross-examiners may go through a testimony with a witness again, thus raising opportunities for contradictions or differing versions to emerge. In these contexts an in-depth analysis of discourse reveals the strategies employed by the participants to construct their versions of reality.

Discourse analysis, then, offers many fruitful avenues for exploring the ways in which groups frame their media appearances, the ways in which claims-makers construct their cases through rhetorical argumentation and, finally, the way in which linguistic patterns can reveal the ideologically based perspectives of media practitioners (see Chapters 8 and 9).

Discourse analysis is generally not as time-consuming as content analysis and it is less tedious to complete. Its main advantage is that it is able to explore, in detail, the structure of texts, the context in which meanings are created and, rather than fracturing media texts, it recognises that one must view the encoding/decoding process in terms of a circuit (Johnson, 1986). As Burgess argues:

"The strengths of qualitative research methods lie in their sensitivity to the contexts of everyday life, their ability to explore the structures of meaning among different groups through discourse analysis, and their importance for both theoretically informed case studies and the development of new theory

through the continual interaction between the formulation of questions, the collection of field data and the development of new concepts". (1990b: 10).

However, there are some important methodological limitations with such approaches. Although inferences can be made about narratives of the same type, thus extending the implications of a particular case study, one cannot generalise beyond this about other forms of narrative. Also, unless discourse analysis is combined with audience reception analysis one cannot make any inferences about ways in which audiences may interpret messages (Livingstone, 1990).

Indeed, both qualitative and quantitative forms of textual analysis have important limitations. As Livingstone maintains:

"Each of these methods has very real problems concerning the kinds of textual structures which they can identify and the certainty with which they can identify them. None is exhaustive, for both qualitative and quantitative methods can be more certain of what they have found, than of not having missed what is 'really' there." (1990:157-158)

Section 2 will discuss methodological approaches towards studying the producers and consumers of media discourse. The major approaches taken towards analysing producers and consumers were, until recently, also based upon positivist assumptions.

## **SECTION TWO: ANALYSIS OF PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS**

### **(i) Quantitative Approaches**

Until quite recently, the dominant approach towards studying producers and consumers was largely positivist and the main tool of researchers studying journalists and their audiences was the social survey. This reflects the previous dominance of statistical methods in sociology, which is linked to the notion that one can measure 'direct' effects upon the audience. The American social-psychological research tradition, which developed during the 1930s, was based upon social survey methodology. It assumed that one could uncover producers' and (more frequently) consumers' attitudes and values through using standard questionnaires, and that these findings could be meaningfully represented in statistical terms.

Much of the public opinion studies and the agenda-setting literature, outlined in Chapter 3, relies upon social survey techniques. Social surveys provide only a superficial guide to the strength of concern about environmental issues. Attitudes do not exist in isolation, neither do they remain static and they are often ambivalent. One should therefore be very cautious about making large generalisations from such research data. As Sandbach argues:

"At best public opinion survey data reveal only very general attitudes based on hypothetical questions with no direct political, social or economic consequences, and more often than not these attitudes are based upon very sketchy exposures to the issues raised by the problems in question." (1980:10)

Indeed, evidence from social surveys about the influence of the media upon public opinion about environmental issues is largely tenuous. Burgess argues:

"The lack of convincing connections between media coverage of environmental issues and public attitudes and values raises serious doubts about both the theoretical and empirical bases of traditional mass communications research." (Burgess, 1990b:10)

Indeed, as Lowe and Rudig suggest:

"In the past surveys have grossly neglected the situational context of environmental attitudes and action. To redress this requires the revival of more qualitatively oriented research methodologies." (1986:537)

Surveys of environmental groups and their relations with the media, and surveys of journalists covering environmental matters, have generally been of a higher standard (for example, Lowe and Goyder, 1983; MacMillan, 1988; Rubin and Sachs, 1973). Typically, these researchers have combined social survey techniques with qualitative approaches. For example, MacMillan (1988) made an observational study of the making of a television series, conducted in-depth interviews with journalists and environmentalists, and made a questionnaire survey of conservation organisations and television journalists. These surveys have provided important information concerning the attitudes of media personnel and environmental groups towards the media coverage of environmental affairs, through using a range of quantitative and qualitative methods.



Although, questionnaires are a relatively cheap way of collecting information from a range of sources, they possess a number of limitations. Closed questions are particularly problematic because they frame respondents' answers. Questionnaires, unlike semi-structured interviews, do not allow the researcher to probe interesting responses. Furthermore, they compartmentalise complex attitudes and values into superficial categories. Moreover, as Burgess maintains, questionnaires are an inadequate means of exploring the process through which consumers interpret media texts:

"Questionnaire surveys seek to establish the extent to which news coverage, for example, has changed people's opinions rather than focusing on the ways in which individuals interpret news items. Closed questions and pre-determined attitude scales cannot reveal how people interact with different media texts nor can they explain why some information is felt to be significant enough to be retained and incorporated into people's knowledge and understanding while most is simply ignored." (1990b:10)

## **(ii) Qualitative Approaches**

Increasingly, sociologists have begun to move away from a reliance upon quantitative methods and have started to recognise the value of qualitative analysis (Burgess, 1984; Elliott, 1979; Filstead ed., 1970; Mitchell, 1983; Schlesinger, 1987; Silverman, 1985; Strauss, 1987; Van Maanen ed., 1983; Walker ed., 1985). Qualitative methods such as participant observation, or interviews, allow the researcher to learn about the social world at first hand. Filstead has defined qualitative methodology as:

"... those research strategies, such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, total participation in the activity being investigated, field work, etc., which allow the researcher to gain first-hand knowledge about the empirical social world in question. Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to get close to the data, thereby developing the analytical, conceptual, and categorical components of explanation from the data itself-rather than from the preconceived, rigidly structured, and highly quantified techniques that pigeonhole the empirical social world into the operational definitions that the researcher has constructed." (1970:6)

Sociologists have begun to recognise that one cannot study social phenomena through using natural science methods since there is an essential difference between their respective subject matters; human beings, unlike atoms, actively construct their own reality rather than passively reacting to external forces. Furthermore, many researchers have concluded that

total objectivity can never be achieved and that theorists should acknowledge the subjective nature of sociological investigation.

This study is based upon the comparative case study method. Relatively little attention has been paid to the case study as a method of social inquiry by sociologists although it has a long history in social anthropology. However, a few researchers have made case studies of particular environmental pressure groups (for example, Burke, 1982; Wilson, 1984; Greenberg, 1985). A case study is a detailed analysis of a particular phenomenon which is thought to reveal new information about the operation of a general theoretical principle. Mitchell defines it thus:

"As a working definition we may characterise a case study as a detailed examination of an event (or series of related events) which the analyst believes exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some identified general theoretical principle." (1983:192)

Lowe and Rudig maintain:

"... case studies of groups and conflicts should play a central role in environmental sociology... once environmental protest over particular issues has emerged, the way these demands are processed should be the focus of analysis." (1986:528-529)

Indeed, researchers should not overlook the case study as a valuable tool of analysis. Furthermore, qualitative case studies can reveal general principles about social life and, as Mitchell (1983) has argued, they are no less valid than quantitative approaches:

"The case study, because of the observer's intimate knowledge of the connections linking the complex set of circumstances surrounding the events in the case and because of the observer's knowledge of the linkages among the events in the case, provides the optimum conditions in which the general principles may be shown to manifest themselves even when obscured by confounding side effects." (1983:206)

It is frequently assumed that case studies possess limited validity because one cannot reliably generalise on the basis of a single example of the phenomenon in question (McClintock et al., 1983). However, here it is argued that case studies permit the researcher to analyse in great detail particular aspects of a given theoretical problem, from which

tentative generalisations may be made. Unlike abstract statistical samples, case studies allow the researcher to take the context, in which social reality is constructed, into greater consideration. As Mitchell argues, generalisations from case studies are made through logical rather than statistical inference:

"...I argue that the process of inference from case studies is only logical or causal and cannot be statistical and that extrapolability from any one case study to like situations in general is based only on logical inference."  
(1983:200)

Though quantitative methods have also dominated mass communications research, in recent years qualitative methodology has become more popular. For instance, more sophisticated forms of analysing television audience reactions are developing [Corner, Richardson, and Fenton 1990a and 1990b; Graber, 1988; Morley, 1980 and 1986; Lindlof ed., 1987; Livingstone, 1990] which suggest that although texts may frame the way in which audiences respond, viewers are not passive; they interpret media texts in different ways, depending upon a variety of contextual factors. Audience reception studies analyse how samples of viewers interpret, or make sense of, television texts. They start from the assumption that texts contain multiple layers of meanings and that there is continual interaction between texts, consumers and producers.

Only a handful of exploratory audience reception studies have been made concerning media coverage of environmental matters (Burgess et al., 1991; Corner, Richardson and Fenton, 1990a and 1990b). Such studies have raised interesting research questions about the way in which audiences interact with texts. For example, Burgess et al. (1991) studied a sample of local people's reactions to news coverage of Music Corporation of America's plans to build a theme park on a valuable wildlife site at Rainham Marshes, Essex. Burgess et al. found that the discussion groups generally displayed little understanding of the political and scientific arguments concerning nature conservation. Also, they found that local people tended to view television discourse on nature conservation as a culturally elitist discourse, which they were unable to directly relate to their own experience.

An advantage of group interviews is that they are less costly and time-consuming than individual interviews (cf. Burgess et al., 1991). Also, they provide an opportunity to study the process whereby meanings are negotiated through social interaction. The quantitative critique of reception studies suggests that while such studies produce interesting insights about the way in which people interpret texts, they do have their limitations. Audience reception studies cannot be replicated under identical conditions. Also there is the problem that members of the group may influence each others' responses. Additionally, one must take into account that these discussions occur in artificial settings and that individual responses may differ in everyday, domestic contexts. However, research does suggest that consumers make sense of texts through interaction with others rather than during the actual viewing moment (cf. Morley, 1986). Moreover, as Strauss (1987) suggests, the validity of a qualitative piece of research rests upon the internal consistency of its theoretical insights rather than upon its representativeness.

More sophisticated approaches, which focus upon the producers of news, are developing. Structured interviews with producers, and observation, are established research techniques within production studies (Tunstall, 1971; Gans, 1980; Schlesinger, 1987). A small, but growing number of studies, have conducted interviews with journalists covering environmental affairs (Lowe and Morrison, 1984; MacMillan, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Warren, 1990; Hansen, 1991a). One of the earliest studies to take this approach was Lowe and Morrison's (1984) study of environmental reporting.

Lowe and Morrison interviewed a number of specialist reporters covering environmental matters between 1981 and 1982. They found that these journalists were often personally concerned about environmental issues and many initiated campaigns about specific matters. More recently, Warren (1990) carried out semi-structured interviews with a number of print journalists, and with representatives of environmental organisations, government and industry.

Semi-structured interviews produce a large amount of 'rich' data. They enable the researcher to understand new concepts which are embedded in discourse. Also, the researcher gains insights about the contexts of interviewees' professional and personal lives. Indeed, semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to probe respondents' answers. They enable the researcher to explore 'why' and 'how' particular issues attract media attention. For example, a number of content analysis studies have found that journalists, in a number of fields, tend to rely upon official sources of information rather than pressure group sources (Schlesinger, 1990; Golding and Middleton, 1982; Warren, 1990). But content analysis tells us very little about why this is the case.

However, there are a number of limitations with interviews. Obtaining access is often a problem. Once access has been obtained, setting up, carrying out, and transcribing in-depth interviews is a lengthy process. The quantitative critique suggests that interview findings are not easily measurable. Also, interviews cannot be replicated under the same conditions, the researcher's presence may bias respondents' answers, or respondents' answers may be false.

Only a handful of studies in this area have used observational methods (MacMillan, 1988; Silverstone, 1985). These studies have focused upon the production techniques involved in making documentary programmes. Observational studies share many of the advantages and limitations of interviews. However, in the case of participant observation studies the potential influence of the researcher upon respondents is much greater, although some steps can be taken to minimize this effect. This will, however, depend upon the size of the observed interaction. Silverstone (1985) relates how he dealt with this problem in his participant observation study of the making of a BBC 'Horizon' film, 'A New Green Revolution'. He suggests that over a long time span his presence became less visible, particularly in view of the high pressured work environment:

"I could not hide. I was, during the research period of the film, observing a group of one. Martin did not have a researcher except for a week or so and his assistant did not travel except during the filming. So I had to find a space for myself, an identity, which was at the same time a non-identity. It took some time to work out and in the beginning Martin felt that he would rather I present myself as a BBC researcher in any interaction he had outside the organisation... I took on the role. But I could not and did not want to sustain it, and we agreed... that Martin should announce me and my function

whenever he made an appointment and give his interviewees a chance to deny me access... Did my presence affect what was going on? Probably. But I do not believe significantly... The film was going to have to be made and it would be made whether I was there or not." (1985:201)

New approaches are developing, then, which make very different assumptions from traditional positivist models about texts, producers and consumers. The qualitative and quantitative methods, outlined above, all have their own particular strengths and limitations. Indeed, the stark distinction which is often made between qualitative methods and quantitative methods is somewhat over-simplified (Van Maanen ed., 1983). It should not be a case of choosing between one tradition or the other. Instead one should acknowledge the particular strengths and weaknesses of different techniques. Indeed, previous researchers have successfully combined different methods, such as content analysis and interviews, which have clearly complemented each other (for example, Schlesinger, 1990; Tumber, 1982; Warren, 1990). The advantages of combining different methods of analysis can be considerable since qualitative methods can explore, in a far more in-depth way, particular findings highlighted through quantitative analysis. As Walker (1985) suggests:

"More generally qualitative research can help interpret, illuminate, illustrate and qualify empirically determined statistical relationships." (1985:22)

For these reasons it was decided that a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods would be used in this study. A content analysis of newspapers rather than television was made because research indicates news-sources view the national press as the most important medium. (cf. Lowe and Goyder, 1983). Also, studies suggest that television news programmes tend to be led by newspapers agendas. A content analysis of a week's national press coverage of environmental issues was conducted. Additionally, a content analysis of a month's national press coverage of the seal virus, and a local newspapers' coverage of the Hinkley Point Inquiry, was carried out.

A pilot content analysis study of nine national newspapers, between 4 July and 9 July 1988 indicated that media coverage of environmental issues is such a wide-ranging, complex and fast-moving area that one would have to spend a huge amount of time devising a coding schedule and collecting data to produce comprehensive and reliable findings. One cannot

make valid generalisations purely on the basis of one week's content analysis. Instead one would need to carry out a content analysis of environmental coverage over a period of several months which would be very costly and time-consuming. An extended content analysis was not possible due to these practical constraints.

Furthermore, whilst content analysis produces a huge amount of statistical data on the frequency that items appear, it does not allow the researcher to analyse the way in which meanings are constructed through language and imagery, and the overall context in which they are placed. As Morgan observes:

"... there is the potential risk of using a microscope to look at an elephant. That is, we run the risk of losing sight of the nature of environmental concerns by examining component elements too closely and categorising a story, we ignore the wider content which may be drawn from that subject". (1988: 69).

The qualitative data was collected through indepth semi-structured interviews with the sources and producers of environmental news. Less structured methods allow more scope for creativity and interpretation, and they capture the complexity and multi-faceted nature of social life. Indepth semi-structured interviews yield a large amount of 'rich' data which provides a valuable insight into the way in which the 'environment' is constructed by the media, and the broader context in which this occurs. A major strength of semi-structured interviews is that they allow the researcher to continually reassess the research frame and build upon new leads. When administered with caution, interviews provide a reliable form of analysis (see Section 3). Indeed, interviewing the sources and producers of news is an established research technique and some excellent studies have been made (cf. Ericson et al., 1989; Schlesinger, Tunber and Murdock, 1991; Tuchman, 1991).

Through combining qualitative and quantitative techniques in detailed case studies the present research provides a model for the analysis of source-media relations. The validity of the case study approach lies in the internal consistency of its theoretical frame; generalisations can be made on the basis of logical inference. Through combining case

studies we can build up a greater more encompassing knowledge of the dynamics of source-media relations through identifying general processes and differentiating factors.

Since the present study was seeking to broaden our knowledge about the under-researched area of non-official sources and the media, the majority of interviews were with non-governmental sources and media practitioners. No interviews were carried out with politicians because it is difficult to gain high level access and they tend to be very guarded in the information that they are willing to volunteer. However, this did not weaken the validity of the study since interviews were carried out with press officers at the Department of the Environment, who possess a detailed knowledge of relations between politicians and the media.

The bulk of the interviews with NGOs were with representatives of environmental groups. A relatively small number of interviews with scientists and representatives of industry were made, since early interviews suggested that they were less likely to be forthcoming about their relations with the media and were more suspicious. For example the press officer for the Royal Society of Chemistry was prepared to reveal very little information. However, this did not interfere with the validity of the study since it was focusing, in the main, upon the under-researched area of environmental groups and the media.

As an alternative to interviews one could have made an observational study of media organisations, or of news sources (cf. Ericson et al., 1989; Schlesinger, 1987). Participant observation provides a detailed insight into news organisations and source activities. However, observation was not undertaken in the present study because the problem of access is so severe. Had access been gained there is also the problem of maintaining a naturalised research setting. One of the major difficulties with participant observation is that there is greater opportunity for the researcher to disrupt the normal behaviour of the subjects. There is also the difficulty of maintaining adequate distance from the investigation. As Newcomb observes:



"The primary disadvantages of participant observation are frequently rooted in limited access. Dependence on the goodwill of host institutions or individuals may result in too easy acceptance of their point of view. Participant observation is also limited to the duration of the researchers' access and it is difficult to generalise from 'snap-shot' experiences. This is doubly the case when the observer is considered an intruder and treated with suspicion. All these matters rest, finally, in another: whether the presence of the observer alters the normal procedures one wishes to observe". (1991: 101)

Although there are also a number of disadvantages associated with interviewing (see Section 3), interviews provide a flexible, dynamic technique for investigating environmental reporting. As Newcomb maintains:

"The primary strength of *interviewing* as a method is its capacity to range over *multiple perspectives* on a given topic. Multiple interviews can be used to increase information and broaden a point of view. All interviews can be used as heuristic devices, as new information leads to new perspectives and questions for later subjects ... All these factors lead to what is perhaps the interview technique's greatest strength - the gathering of more comprehensive information than might be possible in participant observation. Because even the most rigid interview schedule can be altered in process, the researcher is free to follow leads and expand questions". (1991: 101)

Discourse analysis would also have given a great insight into the way environmental issues are framed by the media. It would have helped demonstrate the way in which sources stage their media activities, establish the grounds for environmentalists' claims and reveal underlying assumptions behind producers' rhetoric. However, it was not possible to carry out an in-depth analysis of environmental discourse due to time constraints.

Discourse analysis could have been applied to the case study material in a variety of different ways. One could have analysed the way in which claims-makers construct their cases through rhetorical argumentation, the extent to which environmental reporting is framed within an 'official discourse', and the way in which environmental groups stage their media appearances. Also, an analysis of the way in which texts are worded and structured would have revealed the ideological positioning of the reports.

For instance, the newspaper reporting of the seal virus could have been analysed in terms of the metaphors which were used to convey the disaster (cf. Fowler, 1991). Indeed, a qualitative scan of press coverage indicated that the seal virus was frequently used as a metaphor to draw attention to the wider deterioration of the environment. This generated further media interest. Had time allowed, it would have been useful to have carried out a more systematic analysis of the discourse analysis surrounding the seals issue. Indeed, Fowler's case study of the salmonella-in-eggs affair reveals a similar function of environmental discourse. He claims:

"Shifting from the generalisation 'contamination' to 'pollution' allowed attention to be diverted and dispersed: away from the specific food poisoning affair - which, because of government inaction, was not going to be remedied and was becoming stale news - towards world ecological health" (1991: 176).

One could also have analysed the newspaper coverage of the Hinkley Point Inquiry in terms of linguistic and visual symbols. An analysis of the discourse would have furthered knowledge about the ideological positioning of the debate. It would also have been interesting to compare the way the press deal with the paradigm of 'nuclear inquiry' compared to 'nuclear accident' (cf. Fowler, 1991). Fowler suggests that nuclear accidents tend to trigger off a range of news stories associated with hazards at nuclear plants, resulting in a heightened sense of fear. In contrast, the present research suggests that nuclear inquiries may be dealt with quite differently by the news media because they are viewed as routine and non dramatic.

Another avenue would have been to study the way in which environmental reporting may be couched in terms of 'official discourse' (cf. Fowler, 1991). Press reports are often written in an official, authoritative style familiar to policy-makers and experts. It would have been interesting to analyse the different styles of discourse adopted by different newspapers, and to study how this may vary across different genre, and for different subjects.

This type of analysis would provide greater knowledge about the way in which environmental groups stage their appearances in the media. One could have analysed the extent to which environmental groups are adopting this official discourse and made an

in-depth analysis of the way in which media practitioners use particular styles of language to frame their comments.

Finally, discourse analysis could also reveal the way in which news-sources construct their cases through rhetorical argumentation (cf. Edwards and Potter, 1992; Billig, 1991). In particular, it would have been useful to apply this form of analysis to the case study material relating to the Hinkley Point Inquiry. This would have helped to establish the peculiar nature of legal and scientific discourse, and the strategies used by 'experts' to construct a coherent argument. One could have analysed the transcripts of the Inquiry or the proofs of evidence, as well as the media coverage of the proceedings. This would have helped to establish the justifications being put forward for environmentalists' claims and would have given a greater insight into the nature of environmental debate.

This section has discussed a number of possible qualitative research strategies that could have been adopted. However, in-depth semi-structured interviews were selected as the method which was most suited to gaining comprehensive knowledge about environmental reporting. Interviews provide a means of exploring producers' and sources' own discourse about the media coverage of environmental issues. Through interviews the researcher is able to uncover taken for granted assumptions and can gain an important insight into interviewees' professional lives. Moreover, semi-structured interviews provide a means of probing respondents answers and continually re-analysing the research frame. They are particularly flexible and sensitive to the complexity of meanings associated with the environment.

The next section will outline, in detail, the methodological approach taken in the present study and discuss its advantages and limitations.

## **SECTION THREE: THE PRESENT APPROACH TO METHODOLOGY**

### **(i) In-depth Interviews**

Between January 1988 and February 1991 thirty-nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out with the following: journalists covering environmental issues in the national daily press and the Sunday newspapers; broadcasters covering environmental affairs; representatives of environmental pressure groups; representatives of related interest groups; press officers at the Department of the Environment; and representatives of industry (see Appendix 1). The interviews were spread over a long period of time because this decreased the likelihood that they reflected any particular peak (or trough) in environmental coverage. Also it was necessary for practical reasons since a number of the interviewees were not available for interview until some months after they were first contacted. (For example, Geoffrey Lean was on leave from The Observer when initial contact was sought).

The interviews were based around a set list of questions but they were partially structured to allow optimum scope for probing interviewees' answers (see Appendix 2). The questions were not asked in any particular order; instead they were used to frame the interview so that if the interviewee brought up a particular subject then a question of special relevance was asked next rather than later on in the interview. This made the interview flow better so that the interviewee was able to concentrate his/her attention upon related issues. Also, given the fact that some of the interviewees only had a limited amount of time to spare, it was not possible to ask them all of the questions so instead those questions that were considered to be the most important were selected. As Jones (1985) argues:

"If we ask more questions from what we hear at the time than we have pre-determined we will ask, if we hold on to, modify, elaborate and sometimes abandon our prior schemes in a contingent response to what our respondents are telling us is significant in the research topic, then we are some way to achieving the complex balance between restricting structure and restricting ambiguity." (1985:47)

Although the variable ordering of questions meant that each interview context was slightly different, as Dembo, Leviton and Wright (1956) claim:

"That we deny the necessity of maintaining a rigid formulation and order of questions does not imply that we disregard the influence of preceding events

on a given question. Rather, we assert that this kind of influence can be validly determined only when the analysis of data is made. A rigid order gives an 'appearance' of the same conditions and illegitimately relieves the experimenter from investigating the effects of psychological conditions upon the respondents." (Quoted in Richardson et al. 1965: 49-50)

Initially the theoretical focus was on the media coverage of *industrial pollution* around which the questions were framed. The topic of industrial pollution was selected because it involves a clear conflict of interests between industry and environmentalists. However, early in the course of interviewing it became apparent that to base the study around 'industrial pollution' was unsatisfactory because there are such a wide range of possible ways of defining it. Also the interviewees tended to answer in terms of environmental coverage as a whole rather than in terms of the specific damage caused by industrial pollutants. Indeed, very often the issues are interconnected. So the standard interviewing schedule was adapted to investigate the coverage of 'environmental' issues in general. However, it is acknowledged that the early interviews, which were based on the original schedule, had a slightly different focus to the later interviews and so in some respects they are not entirely comparable.

The questions were designed as much as possible not to be leading and all reasonable steps were taken to recognise possible interviewer bias. As Jones maintains:

"We use our 'bias' as human beings creatively and contingently to develop particular relationships with particular people so that they can tell us about their worlds and we can hear them. In doing this we use ourselves as research instruments to try and empathise with other human beings... What is crucial is that researchers choose their actions with a self-conscious awareness of why they are making them, what the effects are likely to be on that relationship - and indeed whether their own theories and values are getting in the way of understanding those of the respondents." (1985:48-49)

In the initial stages of the interviewing process a list of contacts/possible interviewees was drawn up. Having established who the key people who needed to be interviewed were, an initial set of questions upon which to base interviews was decided. Next, a standard letter was sent to the first batch of interviewees, briefly explaining the nature of the research and asking them to suggest a suitable time when they could meet. A considerable amount of time was spent chasing up these contacts as journalists are notoriously difficult to get hold of.

After waiting for a period of about two weeks those who had not replied to the standard letter were followed up with a telephone call. However, once they had been chased up virtually all of the interviewees responded favourably and sacrificed generous periods of their time to answer the questions. A number of further contacts were generated through the initial interviews and the contact list began to branch out as more familiarity with the field was obtained.

However, considerable difficulty was experienced in securing interviews with representatives of environmental pressure groups based at national headquarters and in some cases several telephone calls and visits had to be made before meetings could be arranged. Even then access was only obtained to talk to general information/publicity officers. Had interviews also been secured with campaigners, in daily contact with the media, then this would have provided more information about what goes on at the grassroots level.

Before each interview considerable time was taken to prepare. For example, an interview with a print journalist would be informed by reading a selection of their recent coverage of environmental issues. This provided a sound base upon which to interpret their response. Also, it was important to allay any fears that the interviewee might have during informal pre-interview conversation. Indeed, the establishment and maintenance of trust is crucial to the negotiation process which occurs during an interview.

The interviews lasted, on average, for about an hour and a half. The respondents were interviewed separately except in the case of David Jones and Julian Rollins, the two-man team who formerly covered the environment for Today. Here, it is acknowledged that there are difficulties since they clearly exerted some influence upon each others response and this must be taken into account when analysing their contributions. Indeed, for this reason all possible steps were taken to secure individual interviews.

The bulk of the interviews were tape-recorded, except where the interviewee expressed concern about being tape-recorded, or where the context was not judged to be suitable (for example, it was too noisy). Detailed notes were taken during all of the interviews, whether they were tape-recorded or not. Where the interviews were not tape-recorded verbatim notes were taken, as far as was possible. The interviews took place in a number of settings (see Appendix 1) but most frequently they were carried out in an office setting. The style of the interviews was adapted to the context in which they took place. For example, interviews carried out in public houses tended to be more informal than interviews which were conducted in a formal office setting. Also the interviews were adapted, to some extent, to suit the personality of the interviewee and, as far as possible, they were made to feel that they had control over the interview situation. The tape-recorded interviews were later transcribed which took a considerable amount of time. Each interview transcript was checked for accuracy. The average length of the transcripts was 22 (A4 double-spaced) pages. The analysis of the transcripts also proved to be a very lengthy process but in terms of generating interesting new concepts it was very fruitful. For example, the interview material suggested that the process by which issues are taken up on the political agenda is much more complex than existing theories suggest (see Chapter 8).

Lists of emerging themes and relationships between concepts were drawn up. Also a number of weeks were spent immersing in the data; reading and re-reading the transcripts and interview notes in conjunction with each other. The analysis of the interviews involved taking into account the stress on particular words, how the interviewee's answers developed or changed through the interview, contradictions, evasions, and attempts to justify institutional practices. Attention was also given to uncovering interviewees' assumptions about the way in which the media construct the 'environment'.

The method used to analyse the transcripts was influenced by Glaser and Strauss' (1967) principle of 'grounded theory'. Glaser and Strauss suggest that the researcher should develop hypotheses through a process of 'theoretical sampling', or induction from the data. They offer the following definition:

"Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to include next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges." (1967:45)

In other words, the researcher's theories are formed through analysing data rather than his/her hypotheses prescribing the findings at the outset. However, this does not mean to imply that the researcher's subjective interests and beliefs do not shape the interpretation process in some way or another. As Jones rightly observes:

"The problem with this, if taken literally, is that categories do not just 'emerge' out of the data as if they were objectively 'there' waiting to be discovered... Different persons, with different perspectives and different curiosities about the area of investigation will inevitably find different categories with which to structure and make sense of the data." (1985b: 58-59)

However acknowledging that all sociological research is influenced, to some extent, by subjective factors general theories of a high degree of conceptual validity can be generated through using such methods. The validity of a case study rests upon the degree to which the general theoretical hypothesis is based upon logical reasoning.

The problem of the researcher getting too close to the social world under investigation has been a major concern of researchers engaged in participant observation studies (Burgess ed., 1982; Filstead ed., 1970). Although interviewing techniques do not involve the same kind of social immersion, there is still the potential problem that the sociologist may become too close to respondents. All possible steps were taken to establish a certain amount of distance from interviewees and to avoid confusing their responses with reality.

Another possible source of bias is that some or all of the information given by the respondent may be false. However, there are steps which can be taken to try and identify such bias (Richardson et al., 1965). For example, when analysing the transcripts any contradictions or discrepancies were noted and then checked against factual evidence or against the other responses. Further, as Blum suggests:



"A well constructed interview is likely to yield sometimes, often when least expected, the kind of information which gives real understanding of attitudes. A long intensive interview is, by itself, a good way to get deeper insights rather than superficial, biased verbalizations. Indeed, it gives not only verbal responses but a whole behaviour pattern. It is very difficult for an interviewee to 'pretend' consistently for many hours of close contact. A well-trained and highly conscious interviewer will, therefore, get enough motivational clues, besides getting the kind of information which helps him to evaluate the data properly." (1970:88)

Another problem with interviews is that they cannot be replicated under the same conditions, thus some claim that it is very difficult to test the validity of findings. But as Filstead (1970) observes:

"By defining reliability and validity synonymously to refer to the consistency with which researchers could replicate other empirical investigations, sociologists operationally defined away the concern for validity... When qualitative methodological procedures are employed, the problem of validity is considerably lessened and concern over the reliability of the data is increased." (1970:5-6)

Furthermore, as Manning maintains:

"The strength of the approach is in the precision in definition that it demands and in its sensitivity to variations of concrete reality. In this sense, then, it is critical not in the testing of theories, causal or noncausal, but in the generation of theory." (1982:291)

Using the method of analytic induction, a number of key themes emerged from the transcripts (Strauss, 1987). These included: the market strategies of the popular press (see Chapter 5); source credibility (see in particular Chapters 5, 6 and 7); competition and co-operation between sources (see Chapter 7); the role of scientific certainty (see Chapter 8); cross media interdependence (see Chapters 5 and 6) and the importance of the local press (see Chapter 9). Quotes which appeared to fit these categories were collected together under individual headings and various sub-categories were formed. However it was endeavoured, as far as possible, not to impose artificial constructs upon the data (cf. Strauss, 1987). Findings which appeared of significance in the early fieldwork were followed up in later interviews and, where necessary, the general conceptual framework was modified to take account of this. A number of conceptual categories were reinforced through interviewee

responses which confirmed each other. Also by paying particular attention to the style of the interviewee's answers, their emphasis upon particular words, and to the way in which they modified their responses during the course of the interview, it was sought to uncover contradictions and unsubstantiated claims.

As the interviews were spread over a lengthy period of time it was important to take into account, when analysing the transcripts, that the mood of the time may have influenced the interviewee's response. For example, some of the early interviews were carried out shortly after Mrs Thatcher's 'green' speech when the mood of the country was much more aroused about environmental issues than it was when the final interviews took place at the time of the Gulf War.

## **(ii) Case Studies**

The qualitative and quantitative analysis of press coverage of environmental issues was based upon the comparative case study method. The original case study selected focused upon national daily press coverage of issues surrounding industrial pollution. A content analysis of nine national newspapers was conducted during the week beginning 4th July 1988 and ending 9th July 1988. The newspapers comprised: The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Independent, The Guardian, The Financial Times, The Daily Mirror, The Daily Express, The Daily Mail, and Today.

It was decided not to include The Sun and The Daily Star in the sample for reasons of speed and because a qualitative analysis indicated that, at that time, they very rarely included items on environmental issues. This is borne out by a content analysis study carried out by Warren, 1990. In order to analyse newspaper coverage a coding schedule was devised which was designed to provide information on: the amount of space allotted to the item; the location of the item within the paper and its prominence; the type of item; the author of the item; the main stimulus of the item; the type of pollution mentioned; the themes discussed in the item; the geographical location of the story; the space allotted to different spokesmen/women; types of illustrative material accompanying the item and content of graphics. Up to four main themes could be coded for each item. As Holsti maintains:

"Categories should reflect the purposes of the research, be exhaustive, be mutually exclusive, independent, and be derived from a single classification principle." (1969:95)

However, the pilot content analysis indicated that a week's sample of press coverage is not sufficient, by itself, to gain a comprehensive understanding of newspaper treatment of environmental issues. Only a longer term qualitative and quantitative study would show how press interest fluctuates over the weeks and months. Smaller samples may reflect the occurrence of particular environmental disasters, or short-term political concern about specific environmental problems, thus one cannot make reliable generalisations about environmental reporting from such data.

In view of these problems the coverage of two specific environmental stories was analysed over a longer time-span. Two detailed case studies were carried out based upon a qualitative analysis of interview data in conjunction with media texts. One was of national press coverage of the seal plague, a virus which killed a large number of common seals off the North Sea during the summer of 1988. And the other case study analysed local and national press coverage of the Hinkley Point Inquiry between October 1988 and December 1989.

These two case studies were selected because they were clearly two contrasting and important environmental issues during 1988. One was an unexpected and relatively dramatic occurrence, whilst the other was a routine scheduled event. The analysis was based upon interviews with Environment Correspondents from the national daily press; broadcasters covering environmental affairs; representatives of environmental pressure groups; representatives of related interest groups; press officers at the Department of the Environment; scientists and representatives of industry (see Appendix 1). Additionally, the case study of the Hinkley Inquiry included interviews with local journalists; representatives of the then Central Electricity Generating Board and representatives of opposing groups (see Appendix 1).

In addition, a content analysis of a sample of newspaper coverage was carried out for each case study. The aim of the content analysis was to fill the gaps in the literature, and to provide a more comprehensive account of environmental coverage by focusing upon the way in which two specific environmental issues were covered in the press. For example, the sample used for the case study of the seals issue included all the popular newspapers, and the case study of the Hinkley Point focused upon the regional press. For reasons of manageability and speed, it was not possible to carry out a content analysis of television news coverage.

The content analysis of the seal virus issue was carried out using the British Library newspaper library archives. The sample of newspapers included all the national daily newspapers and the Sunday newspapers during the month of August 1988. The newspapers were London editions so they may not be completely representative of other regional editions. The national daily newspapers included: The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Financial Times, The Independent, The Daily Express, The Daily Mail, Today, The Daily Mirror, The Sun, and The Star. The Sunday newspapers included: The Sunday Times, The Sunday Telegraph, The Observer, The Mail on Sunday, The Sunday Express, The News of the World, The Sunday Mirror, and The Sunday People.

The month of August was selected because a pilot content analysis of The Daily Mail's archives indicated that the majority of the press took up the story during this month. Also, it was wanted to make a qualitative assessment of national press coverage of the environment during the months leading up to Mrs Thatcher's speech in September 1988. A coding schedule was drawn up which was designed to provide information on: the item length; whereabouts the item was located in the paper; the type of item; who was responsible for writing the item; the main stimulus for the item; the major themes explored in the item; whose views were quoted or presented and how they were referred to; the number and length of accompanying photographs or illustrations; the type of illustrative content and the subjects shown. Only items which made specific reference to the seal virus were coded.

The coding schedule was designed to be flexible. For example, up to four main themes could be coded for each item. The major themes were identified during the pilot analysis. Themes which were not listed amongst the pre-selected categories were coded under 'other main themes'. However, one difficulty was that some of the main themes did not fit neatly into any particular category. Therefore, considerable judgement had to be exercised in order to ensure that coding adequately represented the content of the item. The content analysis of The Bristol Evening Post's coverage the Hinkley Point Inquiry followed a similar, adapted coding schedule. The study analysed the newspaper's coverage of the Inquiry from the start of October 1988, through to its conclusion, at the beginning of December 1989. In addition to the general categories adapted from the previous coding schedule, the Hinkley coding schedule was designed to provide information about whether an item was reassuring or non-reassuring about nuclear power, and whether scientific/technical language was used. Again, fitting some of the information into the pre-determined categories was a difficult task and considerable caution had to be exercised. Items were only coded if they referred to the Hinkley Point Inquiry, thus some of the general items concerning topics raised at the proceedings were not included in the sample.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The research strategy adopted here, then, was to provide a comprehensive analysis of key aspects concerning press coverage of the environment. The methodological critique of the literature indicated that few researchers have made a quantitative analysis of a wide spread of British national daily newspapers. Also, the review suggested that few researchers have analysed the way in which a local newspaper has followed a particular environmental story. The aim of the content analysis was to provide as comprehensive an analysis of press coverage as possible, using the comparative case study method.

However, this chapter has suggested that although content analysis is a useful way of mapping the overall characteristics of media coverage, it should be supplemented with qualitative analysis. The review of the literature indicated that few studies have made an in-depth exploration of the attitudes and assumptions of the producers of environmental news. The aim of the qualitative part of the analysis was to fill important gaps in the

literature. In-depth, semi-structured interviews and textual analysis provide a valuable means of uncovering the personal and professional biases of journalists using their own 'language'. Also, through in-depth interviews the researcher can investigate 'why' and 'how' certain issues attract media attention. Moreover, the credibility of data should be judged by assessing the systematic principles used by the researcher, and the logical validity of the theory generated, rather than the generalisability of results.

The following chapter presents the main findings of the interviews with the journalists, and the content analysis of national press coverage of industrial pollution issues. What factors led the mid-market newspapers to appoint Environment Correspondents in the late 1980's? How do print journalists decide whether a story is 'environmental' or not, and what makes a good news story? How personally committed are Environment Correspondents towards the environment? And what were the factors that Environment Correspondents saw as responsible for the elevation of the environment to the top of the political agenda in the late 1980s?

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# Chapter Five

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## PRESS COVERAGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT: PRODUCERS' ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

### Section One: Professional Values, Occupational Structures and Consumer Demand

- (i) The General Background to the Development of the Field
- (ii) Consumer Demand and Competitive Strategies
- (iii) Agenda-setting and Press Coverage of Environmental Issues
- (iv) News Values and the Coverage of Environmental Affairs
  - a) Events
  - b) Novelty
  - c) Human Interest
  - d) Scandal
  - e) Visual Appeal
- (v) Personal Commitments
- (vi) Constraints on Environmental Reporting

### Section Two: Source-Communicator Relations

- (i) Environment Correspondents' Relationships with Official Bodies and Environmental Organisations
- (ii) Environment Correspondents' Relationships with Scientists
- (iii) Environment Correspondents' Relationships with Industry

## **Introduction**

Over the last three years the field of environmental reporting has undergone a major transformation. This chapter charts the process by which the environment became an established specialist area within journalism. Section 1 explores the characteristics of environmental reporting and discusses major constraints which shape its form. What are the professional norms which govern coverage? How does coverage differ between newspapers, and how does this reflect their editorial identities? Do Environment Correspondents write with their readers' concerns in mind, or are they primarily oriented towards their editor's or peers' judgements? And when middle-market newspapers appointed Environment Correspondents for the first time, were they responding to consumer demand, or to pressure from competitor-colleagues?

In section 2 the focus is upon source-communicator relations. How do Environment Correspondents view their relations with the Department of the Environment and environmental non-governmental organisations? Which newspapers have the closest relationships with official or quasi-official sources? And how do specialists view their relations with scientists and industry? It is suggested that an important problem with Hall et al.'s theory of 'primary definers' (see Chapter 3) is that it overlooks inequalities of access.

### **SECTION ONE: PROFESSIONAL VALUES, OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURES AND CONSUMER DEMAND**

#### **(i) The General Background: The Development of the Field**

Until Mrs Thatcher's speech on 27th September 1988, in which she publicly acknowledged her commitment to the environment, national newspapers viewed the environment as being a 'soft' subject. Environmental matters tended to be covered by Home Affairs Reporters in the mid-market and the popular press and by a range of different reporters, including Science Correspondents, Agricultural Correspondents, Political Correspondents and general reporters, in the serious press. However, the majority of national, daily newspapers created the post of Environment Correspondent in the late 1980s. In addition, many newspapers appointed Consumer Affairs Correspondents, particularly mid-market newspapers such as Today and The Daily Express. And on the 8th September



1989 The Guardian launched the first Environment Supplement, which brought together features on health, consumer affairs, science and ecology.

One of the characteristics of environmental reporting is that the subject matter does not fall into clear compartments. The environment encompasses a range of areas including: ecology, health, business, local planning and development. Decisions about who covers which areas tend to be fairly arbitrary depending upon personal interests and time factors. Separate areas often overlap and there is no set policy on the coverage of environmental matters. For example, John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent for The Guardian, claimed:

"... we have a fair range of people who've got as part of their professional brief responsibility for looking at the environment in toto, with various sorts of overlapping areas of particular interest inside that... So there's nothing that really amounts to a sort of grand strategy but it works in that we have a lot of people looking at it." (11th Jan. 1989, p.2)

The environment was not generally considered important enough by editors to warrant the creation of an Environment Correspondent until Mrs Thatcher's 'green' conversion lent it credibility. James Davies, Environment Correspondent on The Daily Express, noted:

"I mean there was a time when only papers like The Sunday Times or The Guardian had an Environment Correspondent... The Daily Telegraph. I mean now ourselves, The Mail, Today, even The Sun, has got an Environment Correspondent... That's a reflection of just how important it is now and how seriously they're now taking it." (31st Oct. 1989, pp.3-4)

John Hunt, Environment Correspondent for The Financial Times, also stated:

"... it's obviously a good thing for the paper and other papers had got Environment Correspondents and I suppose an argument went on behind the scenes why don't we have an Environment Correspondent and the answer for a long time was we can't afford it. Then I think they came to the conclusion they couldn't afford not to." (24th Jan. 1989, p.8)

Table 1 (overleaf) illustrates the three main phases in which Environment Correspondents were appointed. It shows that the quality press had generally appointed Environment Correspondents *before* Mrs Thatcher's speech in September 1988, whilst the mid-market papers, with the exception of The Mail on Sunday, only followed once Mrs Thatcher had demonstrated the market for environmental stories. For example James Davies, the Environment Correspondent of The Daily Express, argued:

"I think it's become high profile for newspapers, if you're talking about newspapers like ours, I think what did push it right up to the top of the agenda was the... I think, initially, probably the speech that the Prime Minister made in, I think it was September last year, to the Royal Society and when she raised environmental issues to a very high profile and then repeated them at last year's Tory party conference. And I think it was the acceptance of the fact that the Government suddenly realised that the environment was a pressing issue that prompted what I might call the pop to the middle of the road media to take it seriously... Being a Tory supporting newspaper we realised that the Government was now elevating it to a very high priority and therefore that ought to be reflected in our coverage." ( 31st Oct. 1989, p.1 )

**Table 1**

**Dates when Environment Correspondents of the National, Daily Press Appointed**

**Environment Correspondents appointed well before Mrs Thatcher's speech**

Lean, The Observer, 1978 or 1979.

Ardill, The Guardian, May 1985.

North, The Independent, Oct. 1986.

Clover, The Telegraph, early 1987.

(Note: The Times was covering the environment in the 1970s, along with The Observer and The Guardian, but it did not appoint an Environment Correspondent ( Michael McCarthy) until much later).

**Environment Correspondents appointed just before Mrs Thatcher's speech**

Palmer, The Sunday Times, May 1st 1988.

Hunt, The Financial Times, Spring, 1988.

**Environment Correspondents appointed after Mrs Thatcher's speech**

Davies, The Daily Express, Autumn 1988.

Jones, Today, Nov. 5th 1988.

McCarthy, The Times, January 1989.

Revill, The Mail on Sunday, January 1989.

Ryan, The Daily Mail, April 1989.

Rollins, Today, May 1989.

(Note: Many of these reporters were covering environmental matters before they were given the title, Environment Correspondent. )

Interestingly, as Table 2 demonstrates, most of the appointments were from within the papers, the only exception being Richard North who was appointed Environment Correspondent from the launch of The Independent.

<b><u>Table 2</u></b>
<b><u>Journalistic Background of Environment Correspondents</u></b>
Ardill - Local Government Correspondent, <u>The Guardian</u> .
Lean - joined <u>The Observer</u> in 1977 and was responsible for covering environmental* affairs from that date.
Palmer - freelanced at <u>The Sunday Times</u> before he was appointed the job.
Hunt - Political Correspondent on <u>The Financial Times</u> .
Ryan - Investigative Reporter for <u>The Daily Mail</u> .
North - appointed Environment Correspondent from the launch of <u>The Independent</u> . Previously was the editor of the environmental magazine, 'Vole'.
Jones - deputy news editor of <u>The News of the World</u>
McCarthy - deputy night news editor of <u>The Times</u> , reporter, feature writer and foreign correspondent for <u>The Daily Mirror</u> .

There was no external recruitment at this stage because the category of Environment Correspondent did not generally exist in the market. Indeed, a number of studies suggest that the early development of specialist reporting in the American and Canadian press followed a similar pattern (Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Sachsman, 1976; Schoenfeld et al., 1979; Schoenfeld, 1980; Einsiedel, 1988). These studies found that specialist reporters on national newspapers were generally internal appointments and they were recruited from general assignment or government beats. The next phase within the UK press will be characterised by movement across media, as the expertise develops in various quarters. Indeed, this process is already starting to take place. For example, Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for The Daily Mail, and Richard North former Environment Correspondent for The Independent, were appointed as part of The Sunday Times environment team in early 1991.



Although the sample was small, and only industrial pollution items were coded, these findings are in line with other content analyses of the national press coverage of environmental issues during 1988. For example, Warren (1990) found that The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph carried significantly more environmental news items than did The Daily Mirror or The Sun during the second half of 1988.

Environmental reporting, then, did not become an established field of journalism until late 1988. However, surveys of long term trends in public attitudes suggest that a large degree of public concern about environmental issues existed from the mid 1980s. What factors influenced the decision to appointment specialist correspondents? Did newspapers respond to public interest or to pressures from competing newspapers?

**(ii) Consumer Demand and Competitive Strategies**

A number of studies have suggested that communicators pay little attention to their audiences' knowledge or level of information about a topic (for example, McQuail, 1969; Westergaard, 1977; Schlesinger, 1987). Indeed, research indicates that journalists tend to write for their editors and their peers rather than for their audiences. However, print journalists may possess more awareness of audience concerns than broadcasters, because they receive far more letters indicating their readers' interests, which feeds back into the editorial policy of the newspaper. James Davies, Environment Correspondent for The Daily Express, claimed:

"... the pressures for us were political I would say, but now I would say the pressure comes not so much from that side but from reader concern. What we have noticed is that doing environmental stories in the paper provoked huge reader response and people were very, very concerned and ah I think the generating or motivating fact now is very much the fact that readers expect to read about the environment." (31st Oct. 1989, p.2 )

John Hunt, Environment Correspondent for The Financial Times, viewed the audience for environmental news in much the same way as the general readership of the newspaper; largely middle-class and interested in business or financial matters. He stated:

"We've got a very middle-class readership, middle to upper class really. Certainly one of the things where there's been a tremendous reader response has been on the town and country planning side... we had people ringing up and writing in so obviously our people are the type of people who are interested in that because they live in those sort of areas." (24th Jan. 1989, p.14)

Also, Richard Palmer, former Environment Correspondent for The Sunday Times, maintained:

"... the average Sunday Times reader, is the sort of person who lives in a nice three bedroomed house in the home counties somewhere... has become more aware of the issues over the last few years I think." (14th Feb. 1989, p.3)

Similarly, David Jones, the first Environment Correspondent appointed by Today, suggested that reader interest was an important factor in the decision to create a specialist post:

"The editor, David Montgomery, has seen that the readers of Today are showing increasing interest in environmental issues and I hope to demystify the arguments for them." (UK Press Gazette, November 21st 1988, p. 23 )

Indeed, an editorial in the UK Press Gazette observed: "Today was quick to pick up a high interest in environment issues through readership surveys." (14th Aug. 1989, p.10) However, Today's approach towards the coverage of the environment illustrates some of the short-term considerations which tend to guide the tabloid press. The desire to attract more readers undoubtedly played a part in Today's decision to adopt an environmental profile in 1988. Indeed, an ABC survey of the national daily press showed that Today was the fastest growing popular newspaper during the mid to late 1980s (see Table 4 overleaf).

**Table 4**

**Circulation Figures: The National Popular Press**

	<b><u>Nov.- April 1989</u></b>	<b><u>increase/ decrease on corresponding 1987 figures</u></b>
<u>Today</u>	567,362	54.38%
<u>The Daily Mirror</u>	3,951,513	2.74%
<u>The Sun</u>	4,204,009	2.35%
<u>The Daily Mail</u>	1,745,962	- 2.90%
<u>The Daily Express</u>	1,597,198	- 5.15%
<u>The Daily Star</u>	927,171	- 8.77%

*Source: UK Press Gazette, 22nd May 1989, p.10.*

The newspaper's main target was the growing number of young consumers who were brought up during Mrs Thatcher's administrations. David Jones, the newspaper's former Environment Editor, claimed:

"... primarily we're aiming at young adults, in employment, who are likely to do quite well in whatever they choose to do and that's, according to the Editor, our main target.. that's the hard core of it with all of it because otherwise we wouldn't have so many readers I don't suppose." (3rd Nov. 1989, p.4)

Indeed, Paul Crosbie, Consumer Affairs Correspondent for The Daily Express suggested that the emphasis devoted to green consumerism by Today influenced The Daily Express' decision in July 1989 to treat consumer matters as a separate area:

"I mean Today certainly do it more than anyone... They have space which we don't. They have much more space than we do and they started out as a new paper so they were able to target the audience and the sort of readership that they wanted much more. But we are changing slightly but I think probably just changing as fashion changes rather than actually saying that we want to go for a younger market. You know, it's the younger market wants better products so that's what we've started to write about." (31st October 1989, p.5)



Today's sales levelled out somewhat but they continued to increase during 1989, while The Daily Star and The Daily Express lost many of their readers. By August 1989 Today's sales had past the 600,000 mark, representing a 100% increase in two years (UK Press Gazette, 21st August 1989, p.15). The extent to which the newspaper's environmental profile contributed to its success is not clear, but other tabloid newspapers evidently viewed it as an important factor. For example, James Davies, Environment Correspondent for The Daily Express, acknowledged:

"Today has done very well on green issues, I think, and we are in competition with Today and The Mail... The Mail has traditionally been our rival and Today now is a rival for that middle-market. " (31st Oct. 1989, p.13)

However, by 1990, Today's sales were beginning to fall and between June and November 1990 the average sales figure was 524,555 representing a 42% fall on the corresponding period during 1989. At the same time evidence suggested that public opinion was becoming more concerned with the economy than with the environment. Towards the end of 1990 Today experienced financial difficulties and its Environment Correspondents were moved. Although Today won the 1988/1989 British Environmental and Media Award from Media Natura for 'accessible and popular presentation' by a national newspaper, the Environment Editor was not replaced when he was promoted to News Editor. Also according to Lucy Thorp, a press officer at Greenpeace, the Environment Correspondent was moved to cover economic affairs: "... because they thought the economy was going to be the big issue." (22nd Jan. 1991, p.15)

Clearly, then, the decision to appoint environment specialists was influenced by market considerations and economic factors. Indeed, there was particularly fierce competition between The Daily Mail, The Daily Express and Today. Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for The Daily Mail, observed:

"It wasn't considered important enough to have an Environment Correspondent in its own right. And they ran into problems because it became so newsworthy in a very short space of time that they found their work load becoming increasingly impossible to handle so that the News Editor felt that we should have an Environment Correspondent... I think the fact that our middle market rivals had specialists in this area was an

important factor in deciding to have somebody because otherwise we simply wouldn't have been able to compete." ( 25th July 1989,p.1)

**(iii) Agenda-setting and Press Coverage of Environmental Issues**

No systematic research has been carried out which indicates the extent to which the British national press initiated or responded to the growing public concern about environmental matters during the late 1980s. However, previous sociological studies indicate that the media generally follow rather than initiate environmental awareness (Morgan, 1988; Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Sandman, 1974). Rubin and Sachs' (1973) survey of environmental reporters in the San Francisco Bay area found that over fifty percent were appointed in 1970 *after* the environment had become an important political issue. Table 5 overleaf, reproduced from Rubin and Sachs (1973), shows that the journalists typically thought that the increase in the media coverage of environmental issues was due to the environment becoming more newsworthy and the increase in public concern. Only nine percent thought that the media took the initiative.

<b><u>Table 5</u></b>	
<b><u>The Causes of Increased Media Attention to Environmental Issues</u></b>	
<u>Causes</u>	<u>No. of Times Mentioned</u>
Response to public demand, reader interest	36
Existence of pollution itself	19
Newsworthy events	19
Speeches by Erlich etc.	8
Speeches by public officials	3
Oil spills	2
Campus activities	2
Pollution itself made news	4
Media took initiative	9
Responses to conservationists demands/activities	6

*(Source: Rubin and Sachs, 1973:45)*

These findings are backed up by the present study. Many of the journalists interviewed cited reader interest and the physical deterioration of the environment as important factors. When asked about what led the environment to rise to the top of the political agenda after the interest during the early 1970s, the journalists suggested that it was due to a combination of factors. These included: the physical deterioration of the environment, political pressures, the activities of the environmental movement, the increasing support for environmental issues on the public policy agenda, economic stability and the influence of the mass media. Four out of the eleven journalists questioned commented that increasing scientific evidence about the objective, physical deterioration of the environment was *one* of the main factors which led the environment to become more prominent on the political agenda. In particular, they singled out scientific consensus about the importance of global warming and the hole in the ozone layer. For example, Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent for The Times, maintained:

"... a strong element of this was worry for the first time about the planet as a system. Now there had been a scare before in the early seventies, in the previous period, which is very comparable to this in many ways. But what developed during the eighties was something quite different. It was the signs of real damage... what surprised everybody was the suddenness of appearance of the ozone hole over Antarctica... And so it wasn't just philosophical, there was a real problem to worry about and the threat of global warming came along and added to that fear." (22nd Feb. 1991, p. 5)

Peter Marsh, Chemicals Correspondent for The Financial Times, stated:

"... there are more and more signs of problems with environmental affairs and the greenhouse effect, the building up of wastes and toxic refuse for example." (23rd Jan, 1989, p.1)

Similarly Geoffrey Lean, Environment Correspondent at The Observer, responded:

"... I think the evidence has been growing stronger and stronger and stronger..." (17th Jan. 1989, p.1)

Also, a number of the journalists made specific reference to the importance of the media coverage of two major environmental events which coincided during the summer of 1988; the seal virus and the transportation of toxic waste by the *Karin B*. A number of the

print journalists suggested that the media coverage of these two events had a direct effect upon public opinion and upon the political agenda. Indeed, many journalists saw it as an important turning point in the media coverage of environmental affairs. It was perhaps fortuitous that these events happened during the 'silly season' when parliament was in recess; there was little political or business news around so environmental stories were more readily accepted by news editors (see Chapter 8). John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent of The Guardian, claimed:

" I mean very important things last summer were the seal deaths and the Karin B toxic waste ship which happened at a very good time for the newspapers and the rest of the media..." (11th Jan. 1989, p.1)

Geoffrey Lean, Environment Correspondent for The Observer, also noted:

" I think they did go through a transition this summer with the seals in the North Sea and the Karin B, raised in the media, following each other, which in a way moved middle Britain in a way that perhaps middle Britain hadn't been moved before." (17th Jan. 1989, p.2)

Similarly, Richard Palmer, former Environment Correspondent on The Sunday Times, argued:

"I think that's what sent it to the top of the political agenda, the media interest surrounding those two issues." (14th Feb. 1989, p.1)

Indeed several journalists singled out the role of The Daily Mail's 'Save Our Seals' campaign in influencing Mrs Thatcher to make her 'green' speech. The campaign adopted a show business approach and tried to attract more readers by involving famous personalities from the pop music and fashion industry. Indeed, the success of The Daily Mail's campaign was one of the factors, Richard North observes, which led Mrs Thatcher to recognise the mass concern over environmental issues:

"It is likely that The Daily Mail's environmental campaign last summer made Mrs Thatcher realise that 'people like us' cared about the environment and that this made it important to do something about it." (Richard North, Environment Correspondent, The Independent, "Greening of the Written Word", 5th July 1989, p.17)

What triggered the environment to move up the political agenda again was Mrs Thatcher's speech in September 1988. John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent for The Guardian, claimed:

"She didn't say anything particularly new but to have her saying it, and her in particular, since she didn't seem to take that much interest in these matters beforehand, not publicly anyway, was an enormously important thing." (11th Jan. 1989, p.1)

Indeed, virtually all of the journalists interviewed stated that more weight was given to environmental issues as a result of Mrs Thatcher's speech. For example Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for The Daily Mail observed:

"And I think it has made newspaper editors think about their coverage of the environment. Very often the Prime Ministerial lead is taken and then followed by newspapers... Politicians and the media both immediately started to take much more notice of what the environmental groups were saying." (25th July 1989, pp.3-4)

The print journalists, then, suggested that a number of factors explained the rise of environmental issues on the political agenda in the late 1980s. They suggested that the media interest in the seal virus and the Karin B issue played an important part in mobilizing public opinion, but that the environment did not become a mainstream area of journalism until Mrs Thatcher publicly acknowledged her commitment to environmental issues. Their comments are revealing for they suggest that they share an underlying consensus about the importance of these events and their value in terms of news judgements.

#### **(iv) News Values and the Coverage of Environmental Affairs**

"...certain stories have to be covered and you'll find that every newspaper does them because they're just very, very important. When Mrs Thatcher opened the Centre for Climate Prediction Research on the 25th of May and gave a speech in which she revealed Britain's global warming carbon dioxide reduction target, and when that afternoon the IPCC working group one reported what the state of play was officially with global warming, those things were covered by everybody because they were very important and they had to be." ( Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent, The Times, 22nd Feb. 1991, p.6)

Journalists typically operate with an unquestioned professional ideology about what constitutes a 'newsworthy' story (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Chibnall, 1977; McQuail, 1977, Gans, 1980). News is a construction rather than a reflection of reality; it is the product of a series of routine practices and occupational ideologies (cf. Schlesinger, 1987). This ideology of professionalism serves to protect the autonomy of the journalist and to legitimise his/her judgements. In an important study carried out in 1965, Galtung and Ruge suggested that a number of criteria must be met in order for an item to be classified as news: frequency, cultural proximity; size of the event; the involvement of elite personalities and negative events.

Though many of these general criteria apply, research suggests that environmental reporting is distinctive in a number of respects (for example, Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Galtung and Ruge, 1973; Molotch and Lester, 1974; Einsiedel, 1988; Morgan, 1988 and Warren, 1990). The Environment Correspondents who were questioned about their news judgement mentioned five main news values: events, novelty, human interest, scandal and visual appeal. Each of these news judgements will be discussed in turn.

*a) Events*

Environmental coverage is particularly event-oriented. Indeed, Einsiedel (1988) suggests a fundamental problem is that newspapers thrive on immediate, dramatic news whilst environmental issues tend to be long drawn-out processes. The present content analysis of national press coverage of industrial pollution issues indicated that a large number of items were prompted by an event (see Table 6 overleaf). Six items were prompted by a scheduled event (such as a news conference), whilst five were prompted by a unscheduled event (such as an oil spill). Other major stimuli included previous articles in the same newspaper, readers' letters or statements by experts.

<b>Table 6</b>	
<b><u>Main Stimulus of Industrial Pollution Items</u></b>	
<u>Main stimulus</u>	<u>No. of times mentioned</u>
previous article in the same newspaper	11
scheduled event	6
unscheduled event	5
statement by members of the medical profession	4
questions or answers in parliament	3
statement by academic expert/research	1
statement by MP	3
statement by local councillor	1
proceedings in court	1
statement by a representative of industry	1
not clear/cannot code	2
not applicable	8
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF ITEMS</b>	<b>46</b>

The Environment Correspondents interviewed ranked events, particularly negative events, such as the docking of the Karin B or the deaths of seals in the North Sea, as highly newsworthy. Such short term events provide journalists in the quality press with an opportunity to expose wider long term issues, but they rarely initiate concern about the likelihood of such events occurring. For example, John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent for The Guardian, claimed:

"To some extent what grabs the attention of newspapers at any particular time is an incident which draws attention to it, you know the Karin B last summer. We all knew quite a lot about hazardous waste problems and it got a little bit of coverage and then suddenly there was something to draw attention to it so it gets a lot of coverage.. . There's got to be some sort of spark to trigger interest. Newspapers respond to events much more than anything else." (11th Jan. 1989, pp.4-5)

Indeed, the fact that environmental issues are rarely discussed without being triggered by some sort of an event has serious implications for it inhibits preventative action. As Einsiedel (1988) argues:

"The problem lies not so much in the daily presentation of events but in the situation where this daily presentation is not occasionally punctuated by analysis and interpretation." (1988:16-17)

However, the findings from the interviews suggest that if such issues become legitimized by key primary definers coverage becomes less event-oriented. Once Mrs Thatcher, along with other important public figures, such as Prince Charles and the Queen, publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of some of the claims of environmental pressure groups, news values regarding environmental affairs underwent an important change. Geoffrey Lean, Environment Correspondent on The Observer, stated:

"By and large in the press it's easier to explain short, sharp events of plain nastiness. You know, nuclear power accidents or toxic waste explosions or something like that, than it is to explain long on-going processes like the greenhouse effect or the ozone layer or things like that which are projected a long way into the future. Having said that, as soon as something begins to show, like the Antarctic ozone hole or Jim Hansen's comments about the greenhouse effect and the American drought this summer, then perceptions begin to change and it's a lot easier to get them in." (17th Jan. 1989, p.5)

One example of this change in news values was provided by Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for The Daily Mail. He related how a story about acid rain which had been ignored in 1988 became a front page splash in 1989:

"... a couple of weeks ago there was a United Nations report about the effect of acid rain on trees and it said that sixty-three percent of trees in this country had lost some of their leaves because of pollution, mainly because of pollution. That figure was an increase of only about eight percent on the previous year, The previous year the story had been completely ignored by The Daily Mail but this time it was a front page story." (25th July 1989, p.4)

Evidence suggests that a similar 'greening' process has taken place among American national newspapers. Stocking and Leonard (1990) note that environmental coverage in five national daily newspapers and three weekly newspapers made up almost 6% of the news hole



during the first part of 1990. This represented an almost three fold increase in the amount of space devoted to the environment during 1987.

***b) Novelty***

A second major news value mentioned by the journalists concerned the degree to which a story was new rather than second-hand or overexposed. One of the reasons why global warming received so much press coverage during the period of research was because of its novel appeal, as well as its global dimension. John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent of The Guardian, observed:

"It's something that has been going on for quite a long time as an academic subject and has now come into prominence because it seems it's very likely happening. And it's a pollution story with a very new dimension because most of the materials in it are not things that were ever regarded as pollutants before." (17th Jan. 1989, p.4)

The content analysis study found that the highest number of items during the sample week were about the greenhouse effect (see Table 7 overleaf). Five of the nine items about the greenhouse effect were readers' letters, which suggests that it was perceived as an important issue on the public policy agenda. Also, during the sample week, there were three advertisements in The Times, The Independent and Today for environmentally friendly aerosol products.

**Table 7**

**Types of Industrial Pollution Mentioned**

<u>Issue</u>	<u>No. of times mentioned</u>
greenhouse effect	9
contamination of marine waters by accidental discharges	5
pesticides	4
ozone layer	3
non-specified dumping of toxic waste	2
dumping of heavy metals	2
noise pollution	2
industrial discharges which pollute beach/soil	2
ultra violet rays at work	2
asbestos	2
dumping of radioactive waste	2
contamination of marine waters by intentional discharge of chemicals	1
routine emissions of radioactive substances from nuclear power stations	1
leaks of radioactive substances from nuclear power stations	1
acid rain	1
contamination of the air by routine discharges of chemicals	1
contamination of the air by accidental discharges of chemicals	1
general water pollution	1
general hazards of the working environment	1
not clear/cannot code	2
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF ITEMS</b>	<b>46</b>

Another factor which explains why global warming suddenly became more newsworthy in the late 1980s is that it was thought to be having an immediate effect. As Stocking and Leonard argue:

"Another problem is often the unrelenting focus on today. Current environmental crises get the coverage. Future crises are tough to sell... If global warming finally catapulted to page one, many reporters and scientists believe it was because of the summer drought of 1988. Though the drought may have been simply due to normal fluctuations of weather rather than global warming (a possibility dutifully reported in the press), most agreed it was the drought that brought home the threat of a possible future catastrophe." (1990:40-41)

In contrast, the Hinkley Point Inquiry received little coverage by the national daily newspapers, especially in the popular press. Several of the issues had already been raised at the Sizewell Inquiry therefore journalists regarded it as dry and uninteresting (see Chapter 9).

*c) Human Interest*

A further unquestioned news judgement employed by the journalists concerned the human interest factor. Indeed, previous research indicates that the popular press, in particular, tend to prefer stories with a human angle (cf. Warren, 1990). The mid-market newspapers also tend to go for human interest stories. For example, Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for The Daily Mail, maintained:

"... any obvious impact on humans would be a sort of number two grade story if it's only inconveniencing humans. On the other hand if it was actually threatening human lives then that would take it to the very top of the tree." (25th July 1989, p.13)

This emphasis upon issues which directly affect people's lives connects with the rise of the green consumer, and the concern for personal health and well-being, which dominated the late 1980s (cf. McCormick, 1991). Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent for The Times, suggested:

"I mean if the environment comes to affect people personally, as we've seen the beginnings of with mothers concerned about pesticide residues in milk and on fruit, then that is an enduring concern." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.6)

The national newspapers tapped into a fundamental public concern about personal health and the quality of life which became widespread towards the end of the 1980s (see

Chapter 7). A number of newspapers appointed Consumer Affairs Correspondents during this period. Indeed, Today and The Daily Express made green consumerism one of their key areas of coverage. Paul Crosbie, Consumer Affairs Correspondent for The Daily Express, maintained:

"It was a job that we looked at as a paper and we thought that it was a growing area where people wanted more information about the quality of products and that was why basically we set it up... I mean what I do is basically take on board everything that people spend money on and how services affect people... I've become involved in shopping, retailing, I've become involved in the green revolution... because I take it on board and I actually handle it even though other people might be involved as well in the department and it gives us a much more overall and consistent picture of what really is going on." (31st Oct. 1989)

When questioned about why green consumerism had become so popular, Paul Crosbie suggested that it was largely due to the consumer revolution which Thatcherism had set in motion:

" I think people... well I think probably Thatcherism. It's historic isn't it. There has been more money to spend up until recently. People want more for their money.... I think just generally people want their lifestyle to improve so they've become much more knowledgeable and much more fussy about what they want... we've always had problems with food but it's become more publicised lately because people are more worried about it and they're no longer prepared to accept the sort of service that they get in shops that they did in the past." (31st Oct. 1989)

#### **d) Scandal**

Another major news value that was mentioned by the journalists was scandal. Previous research has demonstrated that drama, intrigue and shock are considered particularly newsworthy (cf. Molotch and Lester, 1974). According to Richard Palmer, former Environment Correspondent at The Sunday Times:

"... I mean it's the same as any other news story. It's a good news story a) if it upsets somebody. You know, news is what somebody, somewhere wants to conceal... I mean the ideal story is... The Sunday Times exposes for the first time a national scandal." (14th Feb. 1989, p.6)

David Jones, former Environment Editor at Today, concurred:

"Obviously you're interested in the human side of things. You know how is it going to affect people? Is it really going to have a major effect on peoples' lives? Is it something that shouldn't be happening because it's scandalous?... Who's to blame for those things, you know? Can you point a finger at someone? Can you expose some things that shouldn't be done that are being done?" (3rd Nov. 1989, p.4)

For example, the Camelford water disaster became a major news story during the period under study. The Sunday Times magazine devoted six pages to the story of how chemicals accidentally contaminated the water supply of hundreds of North Cornwall residents during the summer of 1988. Also, Warren (1990) found that The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph each printed two news stories on the Camelford incident during August 1988.

*e) Visual Appeal*

Finally journalists, particularly from the tabloid press, mentioned that the visual quality of a story is another major criterion. A prime example of the importance of visual appeal is illustrated by the coverage of the seal virus during the summer of 1988 (see Chapter 8). John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent for The Guardian, observed:

"Good pictures... it's much easier to get a good picture of a seal than it is to get one of a waste tip." (11th Jan. 1989, p.5 )

Likewise Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent of The Daily Mail, claimed:

"... well it will certainly be covered if it has a good visual impact on wildlife... otters starving because fish have been destroyed by phosphates, phosphate fed algae in East Anglia, for example... The seals... Oil slicks on the birds obviously make good pictures and good television. That would be the top form of pollution story." (25th July 1989, p.12)

A number of the tabloid newspapers have followed Today's example in introducing colour print. This has brought a new dimension to photo-stories. David Jones, former Environment Editor of Today, related how immediate colour pictures enhanced coverage:

"When we went to Alaska to cover the oil spill... we had a machine called a lefax machine which wires colour pictures into the paper. They are still quite rare even in Fleet Street and you can get colour back from the scene of a major disaster within, you know, twenty minutes to half an hour."  
(3rd Nov. 1989, p.10)

However, the need to produce visually appealing pictures should not be over-stated. The content analysis of industrial pollution items indicated that the majority of items were not accompanied by any illustrative or photographic material. Only fourteen out of the forty-six items coded were accompanied by visual content. Of these, seven were artists' impressions, four were contemporary news photographs, two were archive news photographs and one was a map.

#### **(v) Personal Commitments**

News values are to some extent shaped by personal interests and biases. The interviews suggest that the Environment Correspondents viewed global issues, such as the warming of the earth's atmosphere and the destruction of the ozone layer, as the most important international issues, and water quality and toxic waste as the most pressing domestic problems. These concerns reflect the number of items on global issues, air pollution and water and toxics printed in the 'quality' press between 1989 and 1990 (cf. Warren, 1990). The interview findings suggest that some of the print journalists have a considerable personal interest in environmental issues. Richard North, former Environment Correspondent for The Independent was previously editor of the environmental magazine, Vole. Also, The Times' Environment Correspondent, Michael McCarthy, has worked as a volunteer warden for the Nature Conservancy Council. Indeed, Michael McCarthy expressed a strong personal interest in the environment:

"I do care about it a lot. I'm still a fairly keen birdwatcher... I'm a fly fisherman. I take a great delight in chalk streams... Yes, I've got a great interest in it and I'm seized with the problems. I mean I think very bad things are coming to this little planet of ours... the link problems of environmental degradation and poverty and population explosion and

climate change, it seems to me, are more or less insolvable. We're just not going to stop putting the carbon dioxide into the air, I can't see how. I can't see the political mechanism that can stop it." (22nd Feb. 1991, pp.17-18)

The personal interest in environmental issues, which many of the Environment Correspondents share, may explain their tendency to work as a pack when covering issues as a group. A press officer at the Department of the Environment claimed that Michael McCarthy, The Times' Environment Correspondent, is the leader of the pack:

"They are certainly hunting as a pack. When they go to conferences they hunt in a pack and it's mostly the enthusiasm of Mike which has stimulated that, but it's a good thing. It means that we only need to brief if we're going to a conference, if it's a big one, we just brief Mike and he briefs the rest of them." (28th May 1991, pp. 12-13)

Indeed, Richard North, former Environment Correspondent for The Independent, maintained:

"I think we do work quite often as a team in the sense that once we know we are stuck with doing it together as a pack there's no point in making private phone calls or trying to sort of upstage them. Once we know we're a pack then we will help each other." (15th March 1989, p.9)

Evidence suggests that in some instances Environment Correspondents are able to follow up their own personal interests. Warren (1990) observed that The Guardian's Environment Correspondent, Paul Brown, has a particular interest in nuclear issues. She noted that 109 stories about nuclear issues were printed in The Guardian during 1988, whilst only 41 such items were covered by The Daily Telegraph. Indeed, the amount of environmental coverage and the form it takes varies considerably between newspapers. Geoffrey Lean, Environment Correspondent for The Observer, claimed:

"... we have a very good team of Environment Correspondents, who are well informed, most of them, and they would by and large agree I think what empirically are the most important. But that's the correspondents and they're not their newspapers or their editors and the popular press will have designs of its own." (17th Jan. 1989, p.4)





make autonomy and control an issue in continuing dispute." (original emphasis, 1971:121)

Indeed, the findings of the present study suggest that the tabloid newspapers experience a considerable amount of editorial interference over political 'hot potatoes' such as nuclear power. One middle-market Environment Correspondent claimed that he had experienced editorial pressure not to cover issues to do with nuclear power. Furthermore Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for The Daily Mail, suggested that he had experienced some editorial pressure in the past:

"... there was one front page lead story I did about slagging off the nuclear industry which a year ago it would have been impossible for me to write, I mean just not conceivable to write. And as I say there was no interference." (25th July 1989, p.19)

However the amount of freedom enjoyed by Environment Correspondents varies between newspapers. An Environment Correspondent may be largely left to his/her own devices, particularly if they are the only person with specialist knowledge on the paper, or they may be subjected to considerable editorial pressure.

The political slant of the newspaper is another major constraint. Warren (1990) found that The Daily Mirror ignored environmental stories which put the Conservatives in a good light. She suggests the reason why the amount of environmental stories in the newspaper actually declined over her period of study was because: "... the environment has become a declared concern of the Conservative Government." (p.37)

Similarly, political ideology has influenced The Daily Mail's selection of environment stories. David Jones, former Environment Editor of Today, related how the paper carried a front page lead exposing the connections of Dr John Cunningham, the Labour MP, with a waste tipping company:

"... The Mail did a story about John Cunningham. It was on the day, the opening day, of the Labour Party Conference and revealed his links with a firm that's tipping waste into the sea at Northumbria and you're not going to tell me that they didn't time that to coincide with the first day of the Labour Party Conference." (3rd Nov. 1989, p.11)

Pressures of space and competing news stories act as a major constraint for all Environment Correspondents, but the degree to which this affects environmental coverage varies across newspapers. Michael McCarthy, The Times' Environment Correspondent, claimed:

"I am competing with very limited space with about fifteen other specialist writers, a political staff of about ten, about fifteen foreign correspondents, agencies from all over the world and agencies from all over Britain, and The Times Home Department gets about two hundred and fifty a day in and we use about thirty. So I am just simply not going to cover a story that has got no chance of getting in the paper... I would have said that whether or not it will get in the paper is a key determinant, whether it's important enough to force its way in." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.7)

In contrast Charles Clover, Environment Correspondent for The Daily Telegraph, generally has an easier job getting environmental stories into the newspaper. Michael McCarthy recalled:

"I remember writing six hundred words on Mick Kelly from the University of East Anglia, saying that the Thames Barrier could be topped by a storm surge with a certain amount of sea level rise that was in the predicted limits. And that went straight on the spike and Charles Clover got a page lead with it... he's got more space in The Telegraph. There is simply, physically, more space and they put more stories in. And there's a sort of Telegraph format; it's fourteen to eighteen short paragraphs. The Times is more discursive somewhat." (22nd Feb., 1991, p.35)

To a certain extent, environmental coverage in the national press reflects the general identity of particular newspapers. Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent for The Times, suggested:

"The Times is a paper for the establishment so I tend to do Whitehall things. The Telegraph is a paper for the petit-bourgeoisie so Charlie tends to do countryside things; The Guardian is a paper of the left so Paul does nuclear energy and whales." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.8)

Environmental news, then, is the product of a number of factors. It is shaped by professional news values, personal interests and values, the constraints of time and space, and editorial pressures. However, environmental reporting is also influenced by source-media relations. Section 2 discusses the Environment Correspondents' attitudes towards their major

sources; government, environmental groups, scientists and industry. Media professionals believe that they can deal with complex issues effectively but to what extent is this a function of the increased professionalism of their main sources?

## **SECTION TWO: SOURCE-COMMUNICATOR RELATIONS**

### **(i) Environmental Correspondents Relationships with Official Bodies and Environmental Organisations**

The review of the literature indicated that journalists tend to rely most heavily upon routine, official sources of information. In line with previous research (for example, Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Sandman, 1974) the present content analysis of the national press coverage of industrial pollution items found that government, industry and experts were cited as primary sources more frequently than environmental groups or members of the public (see Table 8). During the sample week seven readers' letters were published on environmental matters, only one item cited an environmental group as a primary source, whilst government and experts were each cited as primary sources in thirteen items and industry in nine items.

<u>Source</u>	<u>No. of times cited</u>
MPs	11
local government officials	1
members of the European parliament	1
industry	9
trades union representatives	1
members of the medical profession	7
scientists	4
academics	2
environmental groups	1
journalists	2
celebrities	2
other sources	2
not clear/cannot code	1
not applicable	2
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF ITEMS</b>	<b>46</b>

Indeed, the majority of the print journalists interviewed claimed to rely a great deal upon official sources of information. For example, John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent at The Guardian, argued:

"A great, a very large extent of our basic information does, yes, come from government and quasi-government sources rather than individual members of the public... Put it this way, statements by, information from official organisations of one sort or another is very often news in itself so it gets carried for that reason, you know... there is slightly more weight on that than somebody ringing up and saying I'm Joe Bloggs and I live somewhere or other and I'm worried about..." (11th Jan. 1989, pp. 9-10)

However, notions of balance were frequently invoked by the journalists as a way of legitimising their professional practices. For example, Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent for The Times, maintained:

"The government is just as guilty of... using the fact that there is no scientific direct link between a and b to justify doing anything about b." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.12)

Michael McCarthy went on to suggest:

"Somebody in my position is trying to get unofficial government information as much as official government information. I'm trying to go behind the press offices all the time... The press office at the Department of the Environment is specifically targeting me and my colleagues all the time and trying to get us to report the news the way they want it reported and so are ministers, all the time. And over the White Paper on the Environment it was particularly difficult because I'm quite close to some of these people and one has to report the truth and sometimes they don't like it and you have to think through your role as a journalist and you have to be prepared to fall out with people." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.21)

These findings generally support Hall et al.'s (1978) argument that definitions of the state tend to dominate news coverage. However, findings from the interviews with Environment Correspondents suggest that Hall et al.'s theory of 'primary definers' needs to be refined in certain respects (see Chapter 3).

First, Hall et al.'s theory fails to take account of the inequalities of access within accredited sources; at times some actors obtain much more access to the media than others. The interviews suggest that some environmental campaigners have become over-accessed by the media. One of the key contacts Environment Correspondents mentioned again and again was Andrew Lees, Water and Toxics campaigner at Friends of the Earth. He was often singled out as having developed a particularly professional approach towards dealing with the media. Richard Palmer, former Environment Correspondent at The Sunday Times, claimed:

"... [he] is very good at looking at the world the way a journalist would look at it, picking the best line and really going for it." (14th Feb. 1989, p.10)

Richard North, former Environment Correspondent at The Independent, agreed. He maintained that Andrew Lees has also proved a very good source of 'off-the-record' information:

"... I have to take him very seriously because he knows a hell of a lot and there are people who will talk to him who shouldn't and that matters... And that's gold dust because, frankly, if somebody in a water authority, let's say, or in the Government were to believe, some quite senior official, were to believe that his governors were behaving badly in a certain matter they would usually get in touch with Andrew not me." (15th March 1989, p. 13)

One of the problems with previous studies of source-media relations is that they have tended to treat media in an undifferentiated fashion (see Chapter 3). However, the interviews with Environment Correspondents in the present study suggest that important differences exist between newspapers in terms of source relations. For example, the interview findings indicate that 'quality' establishment newspapers, such as The Times and The Daily Telegraph, have a much closer relationship with the Department of the Environment than other sections of the press. Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent for The Times, enjoys a particularly close relationship with the Department of the Environment (see Chapter 7). He claimed:

"I know, I think, as much as anybody about the Department of the Environment and the way the civil service works, as much as anybody in the Environment Correspondents." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.23)

In contrast Richard Palmer, former Environment Correspondent for The Sunday Times, suggested that he had few dealings with the Department:

"I find that I don't actually get many stories from official sources, from government... that's something I'm trying to improve, you know, my contacts at the Department of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture. Ah but I have found that over the last year most of my stories have come from the pressure groups." (14th Feb. 1989, p.9)

Similarly Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent at The Daily Mail, claimed:

"When I deal with the Department of the Environment it's mainly because they've announced a new initiative and I'm reporting it and I'm finding out background to see why they've done what they've done... But normally the initiative comes from other groups, the Countryside Commission or the Nature Conservancy Council, the government advisory groups, or the pressure groups like Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace. And if you ask the Department of the Environment for confirmation of facts and reports by these other groups they will normally say that they simply can't provide the information... They have experts who keep an eye on the general field and are aware of claims and counter claims about a particular issue... But they won't come out with an emphatic line on it, or only very rarely." (25th July 1989, pp. 10-11)

A second problem is that Hall et al. deduce patterns of source-dependence from a reading of newspaper content (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). This does not give us any indication of the actual level of coverage; many of the articles written never appear on the pages of a newspaper. Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent for The Times, observed:

"When you say coverage does coverage consist of what's printed in the paper or does coverage consist of the journalist going down there and covering it and writing a story because the two are separate?... I mean I've covered lots of things which haven't appeared in the paper." (22nd Feb. 1991:34)

However, it appears that the most officially sourced is what gets into a newspaper. A content analysis study (Morgan, 1988) of The Times and The Guardian indicates that Friends of the Earth and the Council for the Protection of Rural England are two of the major environmental groups cited by print journalists. Interview data from the present study suggests that another key environmental source used by Environment Correspondents is Greenpeace, despite being viewed with a certain amount of suspicion. Indeed, the two main environmental non-governmental organisations mentioned in the interviews with Environment Correspondents were Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. Other major sources mentioned included: the Council for the Protection of Rural England; the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF); the National Society for Clean Air; the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society; the Marine Conservation Society; the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature; Ark; the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB); and the Campaign for Lead Free Air (CLEAR). Quasi-official environmental bodies, such as the Countryside Commission and the Nature Conservancy Council, were referred to less often by the journalists.

A further difficulty with Hall et al.'s theory of structured access is that primary definer status implies credibility. The interviews suggested that the degree to which Environmental Correspondents view environmental groups as credible differs significantly. Environment Correspondents claimed that their relationships with environmental pressure groups were generally good, although some recognised the need to establish better contact with individual groups. A typical comment was that of John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent for The Guardian:

"I guess it's pretty good. They regard us as a paper which reports environmental issues, takes them seriously, and we regard them as good sources of information." (11th Jan. 1989, p.7)

Sandman (1974) found that a number of journalists surveyed in the San Francisco Bay area claimed they were suspicious of some conservationist groups. He maintains:

"Unfortunately, many reporters tend to distrust and discount the pronouncements of amateur ecologists who bombard them with information... Often news from conservationists is held until a more trusted-and safer-source picks it up." (1974:227)

The Environment Correspondents in the present study were generally suspicious of Greenpeace. Indeed, six out of the ten Environment Correspondents questioned expressed the view that they were mistrustful of the organisation. A typical comment was that of Richard North, former Environment Correspondent for The Independent, who claimed he often ignored press releases from Greenpeace:

" It so often was wrong. In the end I stopped reading it altogether because I thought... while a bit of it will be right and it will all be to the greater good of mankind, substantially it will be wrong in its science or its evidence or its balance. And frankly I would say I can't be bothered to spend the enormous amount of time required to blow its cover and therefore I don't and that's maybe a bad thing." (15th March 1989, pp.11-12)

Similarly, Michael McCarthy, The Times' Environment Correspondent, stated:

"Greenpeace take upon themselves the real radical role... they're more confrontational and combative... I have had press releases from Greenpeace that contained things which weren't true, on investigation... I think that there were certain individuals, in my experience, who seemed to feel that the individual small details of cases it didn't really matter if they were absolutely true or not, because we're all in this together aren't we and the big issue justifies whatever you do to solve it... I mean Greenpeace have got a credibility problem with Environment Correspondents because they put things out which aren't true." (22nd Feb. 1989, pp.10-11)

Julian Rollins, former Environment Correspondent at Today, suggested the problem is that some journalists expect to be able to rely upon information supplied by Greenpeace without having to check it. He claimed some journalists simply regurgitated a statement taken from an impromptu press conference called by Greenpeace, which was later found to be misleading:

"... on the next day a lot of people had just taken this and put it out. Now they then would turn round if there had been any complaints and say well, you know, Greenpeace told us. You know, they got their facts wrong. But if you checked out... the facts... of course it wasn't the case. But it took quite a lot of checking out and a lot of people, I think, are too ready to take the environment groups, you know, as the word." (3rd Nov. 1989, pp.6-7)



Others claimed that Greenpeace are not very good at presenting their material in a form which can be easily used by print journalists. For example, John Hunt, Environment Correspondent for The Financial Times, argued:

"... every week or so they send me something about they're going to do something, float a bloomin inflatable whale somewhere. You know, throw away a dozen fur coats into the Thames because of you know.. animal skins and all this sort of stuff. But it's all geared to television. I mean it might be in a local paper but it's not, you know, The Financial Times isn't going to. I've had hardly any meaningful contact with them oddly enough." (24th Jan. 1989, p.12)

Richard Palmer, former Environment Correspondent for The Sunday Times, agreed that Greenpeace do not gear themselves enough to the needs of print journalists. However he maintained that the quality of their research has improved:

"I haven't used Greenpeace as much as Friends of the Earth but again I think they have improved their accuracy, just over the last year. They're much more thorough with their research. What I find about Greenpeace is that they're not too clued into what journalists want." (14th Feb. 1989, p.10)

James Davies, Environment Correspondent for The Daily Express, claimed:

"Greenpeace is very good for some things... but what they do they tend to get a bit wild at times, that's the only problem. Ah... I mean our paper is still slightly wary of people who gather in rubber dinghys off Sellafield, you know, and start coming out with samples of sea water and saying well we're all going to die within the next six months or everybody in Cumbria is going to get leukemia and so on. I think they're a bit wary of that... once or twice, unfortunately, some of the contentions they've been putting forward as fact have eventually turned out to be not quite as factual as they would have us believe and for me that's dangerous." (31st Oct. 1989, pp.18-19)

However David Jones, the former Environment Editor for Today, claimed:

"It's very rare that you find that the government, the government actually... come out and say Greenpeace are actually completely wrong on this and they've put out misleading information." (3rd Nov. 1989, pp.7-8)

Claims by Greenpeace that the deaths of dolphins and seals around British coasts were caused by pollution have been challenged by a number of scientific experts (cf. Lavigne, 1989). One Greenpeace briefing report entitled 'Save Our Seals' claims, ' Our seals are dying: pollution is implicated as a major factor in the disaster'. Ironically it was Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for The Daily Mail, which launched a campaign based on the notion that pollution was a major cause of the seal virus, who said that these sort of unsubstantiated claims have led some journalists to treat Greenpeace with particular caution:

"Greenpeace have this campaign of going around on the 'Moby Dick' round the whole coast, claiming there are only two bottle-nosed dolphins left, which is regarded as an absurd exaggeration of the problem by leading experts on dolphins. And they have seized on the death of a couple of dolphins with liver problems as evidence that pollution must have been the cause... So that, to some extent, weakens their credibility with the journalists who deal with them all of the time. It makes us think again about how much we should be taking what we're fed with by them just on the face of it." (25th July 1989, pp. 8-9)

Despite this general mistrust Greenpeace still manage to obtain a great deal of coverage. Chris Rose, director of Media Natura, suggests this is because news editors tend automatically to accept material from Greenpeace, bypassing the Environment Correspondents in the process:

"Now they don't like Greenpeace and they don't like Greenpeace because Greenpeace goes past them. It gets straight onto the front page of the newspaper because the News Editor will say I don't care whether you think this is news or not, that they're blocking this ship up the Thames, it looks like news as far as I'm concerned and the public will think it's news." (24th Jan. 1990, p. 12)

This also came across in the interview with Richard North, formerly Environment Correspondent for The Independent:

"... I was vehemently against Greenpeace earlier on because it so upset me the way I was expected to jump by the newspaper here. They thought I'd jump when Greenpeace said jump." (15th March 1989, p.12)

However, Friends of the Earth were generally thought to produce well researched and reliable reports. Friends of the Earth operate in a very different way; their approach is based upon individual campaigners establishing contacts with journalists. This has facilitated a feeling of continuity and trust. A typical comment was that of James Davies, Environment Correspondent at The Daily Express:

"... on the militant front I would say that Friends of the Earth are one of my best contacts... Oh it's excellent, now, it's absolutely excellent. I mean to the point that if you can't make one of their press conferences they'll make sure they'll fax something to you." (31st Oct. 1989, pp. 18-19)

The interview findings, then, suggest Hall et al.'s theory of 'primary definers' needs to be modified. Environment Correspondents' relations with official bodies and environmental groups are not static and rest, to a large degree, upon the perceived legitimacy of sources and on their strategies towards gaining media attention.

## **(ii) Environment Correspondents Relationships with Scientists**

Sociological research has established that journalists in general tend to make more use of source material from 'establishment' scientists, who are attached to an official government organisation, rather than 'independent' scientists (Dunwoody, 1986). Rather than having a vast network of contacts journalists tend to rely upon a few well-known scientists. Research has also indicated that journalists view scientists who have already been used as sources by the media as more credible (Dunwoody, 1986). Further, research has shown that journalists and scientists tend to view each other with suspicion.

The interviews with the Environment Correspondents indicated that they share this general suspicion of scientists. For example Richard Palmer, previously Environment Correspondent at The Sunday Times, maintained:

"I suppose, when you're talking about scientists, I suppose in a way one is often quite sceptical if a scientist rings up saying he's done some research and it will make a great story. Well the automatic thing is that you think well he's just trying to get a bit of money for research. So I think we're always sceptical of people like that but we wouldn't want to stop them ringing because every so often there is a really good story about a scientist

who's done some research which has been ignored by the Government or, you know, suppressed." (14th Feb. 1989, pp.16-17)

Environment Correspondents tend to be much more suspicious of overtly political scientists, such as those attached to Greenpeace, than scientists employed by Government related bodies, such as the Natural Environment Research Council. In the words of Geoffrey Lean, Environment Correspondent for The Observer:

"... it's much dodgier with... scientists who are political, who take a political stance. Whether that happens to be someone who works for the CEEB or someone who works for Greenpeace." (17th Jan. p.7)

The Environment Correspondents also claimed that scientists are often wary about dealing with the media. For instance, Peter Usher, a reporter involved in The Daily Mail's 'Save Our Seals' campaign, related how one of his key sources was at first very cautious about working with the media:

"Dr John Harwood, who was a tremendous help... to begin with he was very, very suspicious and understandably so, I think... I would hope now that after having been in contact with him for almost a year that situation has changed and I believe it has changed because he realises the good effects that newspaper coverage can have on this and we work together now." (25th July 1989, pp.9-10)

Scientists are notoriously bad at communicating with the media but in recent years they have become more professional in their public relations techniques. However, some Environment Correspondents still maintained that scientists tend to be poor at media relations. For example Peter Marsh, Chemicals Correspondent at The Financial Times, claimed:

"I mean scientists are very bad at putting themselves forward... It's their lack of self confidence, really, plus their general feeling that what they're doing is difficult to explain so they don't try. And general inhibition, I think, about getting involved with broad issues" (23rd Jan. 1989, p.13)

Although much work has been carried out into public consumption of scientific news little is known about the background and expertise of the journalists who report on environmental matters. A study by Sandman (1974) found that the majority of environmental

reporters in the San Francisco Bay area did not have any scientific training. None of the Environment Correspondents in the present study had a scientific background and many had previously been general reporters. A number of the interviewees saw their lack of specialist training as an advantage. They argued that scientists have to explain concepts to them in layperson's language so their stories are more comprehensible. For example, Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for The Daily Mail, stated:

"I don't think that's a hindrance because we have to explain it in terms that our readers will understand and so we have to make the experts explain it to us in simple terms. Nevertheless, certainly when I started, and still to some extent, I felt very inadequate because of my lack of scientific knowledge and I will always check with one, at least one and preferably two scientific experts, before I decide my particular line on a story." (25th July 1989, p.15)

Indeed as Russell has suggested:

"Problems in science coverage often arrive when inexperienced general reporters get a 'scoop' on a local science or medical story that they perceive to be of major significance. Because of their lack of background, general assignment reporters are more likely to portray a story as 'newer' or 'bigger' than it actually is... Nevertheless, many good general assignment reporters are able to tackle tough subjects of any kind and often outdo speciality reporters by asking basic questions that readers want answered." (1986:89)

However, unless the reporter checks the story with a number of scientists, both orthodox and non-conventional, then there is the danger that he or she may too readily accept scientific information, particularly when facing particularly tight deadlines. Richard Palmer, former Environment Correspondent of The Sunday Times, admitted:

"... particularly where you're doing things about toxic waste I find it very difficult sometimes because I haven't got a clue what all these chemicals do and what they are and it's easy to be taken in by somebody telling you these chemicals are going to kill somebody." (14th Feb. 1989, p.8)

Similarly, David Jones, former Environment Editor for Today, claimed:

"... a lot of people are just very glad to get their views into the paper. They're not too bothered if you don't go into every... as scientists they would qualify everything... but they're not too bothered if you don't for the

masses as long as the masses get the general message and I think that's what we've been doing this past year and sometimes it goes wrong." (3rd Nov. 1989, p.17)

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties is that by simplifying complex scientific information one inevitably distorts it. As Geoffrey Lean, Environment Correspondent at The Observer maintained:

"... I think the main problem is that you cannot simplify without distorting to some degree but you have to do it honestly and with the least distortion that you possibly can." (17th Jan. 1989, pp. 6-7)

### **(iii) Environment Correspondents Relationship with Industry**

Sociological research suggests that journalists in general also tend to be cautious about using industrial sources (Dunwoody, 1986). The Environment Correspondents questioned about their relationship with industry almost universally claimed that they were sceptical about industry, particularly the recent attempts by industry to be seen to be green. The findings from content analysis studies conflict but would seem to support the argument that Environment Correspondents tend to be sceptical about industry.

Einsiedel (1988) found that representatives of industry (13.2%) were more frequently mentioned in the Canadian press than environmental pressure groups (8.1%). However, Morgan (1988) found that environmental sources were used more frequently than industry in both The Times and in The Guardian newspapers. Also Rubin and Sachs (1973) found that press and television reporters covering environmental matters claimed that representatives of environmental pressure groups received greater coverage than did representatives of industry. Indeed, they claim:

"Although industrial public relations men supply newsmen with as much or more material than do conservationists, the reporters apparently give more credence to the conservationists." (1973: 41)

Although many of the Environment Correspondents expressed some suspicion about industry they admitted that this area had provided them with a wealth of story ideas. For example, David Jones, former Environment Editor of Today, claimed:

"I think it's a love, hate... they use us and we use them when we have to and they're constantly trying to get us to print things which we don't want to see in the paper which amounts to adverts. If it suits our purpose we'll do it. I mean that's been a problem with industry and, you know, has been one of the nice little areas for us because I mean a lot of industries have gone green this year... they want to be seen to be green but if it means really changing things... they don't really want to commit themselves so I'm very sceptical." (3rd Nov. 1989, p.19)

In recent years many large industries in Britain have undertaken extensive public relations campaigns to improve their public image. John Hunt, Environment Correspondent for The Financial Times, argued that industry needs to become more open in dealing with the press:

"... I'd say they're still at the sort of glossy brochure stage. They haven't gone into it into depth, into public relations, in the sense that, you know, as I say they haven't got the nitty gritty and the sort of facts and figures and they're not really frank enough about their own difficulties in dealing with the environment." (24th Jan. 1989, p.11)

The Financial Times has additional pressures from industry because it depends to a large degree upon advertising from the commercial sector. The newspaper is particularly keen to report on companies which are putting a lot of money into environmental initiatives. John Hunt, Environment Correspondent of The Financial Times, maintained:

"... there is another side from our point of view that you don't get so much with the other papers, the self-interested side, because I mean particularly with the supplements they're interested in the advertising that comes from the environmental side and the new sort of pollution control equipment..." (24th Jan. 1989, pp. 5-6)

Advertising pressures can exert a considerable pressure upon news reporting. For example, Sellers and Jones (1973) found that one reporter was unable to cover the dangers of a gasoline additive in the San Francisco Bay area because of the advertising campaign of Chevron F-310. As Sellers and Jones argue:

"... the economic health of a newspaper, magazine, or broadcast station is directly dependent on the goodwill of its advertisers. Some caution on the part of news executives (and extending from them to reporters) to avoiding major companies in their stories is inevitable." (1973:54)

When questioned about why environmental issues are given much less space in The Daily Express compared to Today, Paul Crosbie, the Consumer Affairs Correspondent at The Daily Express, suggested:

"It's pressure from advertising, pressure from the company board who like to see the money come in and also its really the problem to re-attract more advertising. I mean we sell about two and a half times as many as Today so advertisers go to us rather than go to a paper like Today." (31st Oct. 1989)

Sometimes feature material appears alongside advertisements in a mutually reinforcing way. For instance, The Observer carried an advertisement for a non CFC aerosol product next to a feature about the damaging effects of CFCs. The Observer's Environment Correspondent, Geoffrey Lean, denied that this constituted an advertising ploy:

"... we try extremely hard to avoid such a juxtaposition. Ah a member of the public might think we were trying to encourage it for commercial reasons... Now had that been spotted... they basically would have tried to move that." (17th Jan. 1990, p.13)

A study by Sandman (1974) found that journalists surveyed in the San Francisco Bay area tended to accept advertiser pressure exists, but they denied personal experience of such constraints. As Sandman argues:

"Certainly advertiser pressure is not the omnipresent burden that the conspiracy theorists imagine. Yet the possibility of such pressure *is* omnipresent. Though many sensitive stories are printed or broadcast in the end, their publication is often preceded by intensive and extensive debate with editors and executives. Reporters may not fear the outcome of that debate so much as they simply want to avoid the debate itself. Ignoring advertiser-related news items is much easier than pushing them through the hierarchy." (1974:233)



This section, then, has suggested that journalists' attitudes towards their sources play a crucial role in structuring environmental news. Although the state's definitions tend to channel environmental reporting, primary definer status does not necessarily imply credibility. As Solesbury argues:

"... attention grabbing is insufficient by itself to get a new issue on the agenda for public debate. Issues also need legitimacy, that is widespread recognition that they are the proper concern of government." (1976:387)

### **Concluding Remarks**

The chapter started off by noting that press coverage of environmental affairs was transformed between 1988 and 1990. It was suggested that economic considerations largely explain why mid-market newspapers suddenly began to cover the environment and consumer affairs as specialist fields of journalism during the late 1980s. Intense competition ensued between rival newspapers fighting for a newly discovered band of young consumers. However, these same tabloid newspapers are not giving the environment as high a priority during 1991. In particular, the Today newspaper have not replaced their Environment Correspondent.

It was suggested that the content analysis and interview findings indicate that Hall et al.'s (1978) theory of 'primary definers' suffers from some blind-spots. In particular, Hall et al. overlook inequalities of access among 'primary definers'; at times some actors become over-accessed to media. In many areas Friends of the Earth has become a key definer of the agenda, while Greenpeace still suffers, to a degree, from a lack of credibility. Also, there are significant differences *within* the press; Hall et al. assume that one can generalise about source-media relations across the media.

Chapter 6 explores television news coverage of environmental issues and discusses the differences and similarities between press and television treatment of the environment. Also, the chapter considers the different constraints which influence two major genres: news bulletins and documentaries. What sorts of news judgements influence these distinct discourses and what sort of an audience impact do they have?

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## **Chapter Six**

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### **TELEVISION COVERAGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT: NEWS, CURRENT AFFAIRS AND DOCUMENTARY PROGRAMMING**

#### **Section One: Agenda-setting and Television Coverage of the Environment**

- (i) The Natural History Tradition and the Greening of Television
- (ii) Perceptions of the Audience
- (iii) Audience Demand
- (iv) Professional and Personal Values
- (v) Primary Definers and Professional Routines

#### **Section Two: Constraints upon Television and Press Treatment of Environmental Affairs**

- (i) Visual Angles
- (ii) Political Yardsticks
- (iii) Financial Resources
- (iv) Time Constraints
- (v) Editorial Pressures
- (vi) Media Interdependence

## **Introduction**

This chapter explores the findings of the interviews with television journalists. It analyses their attitudes towards media coverage of environmental affairs. Does a broad consensus exist among television and print journalists or do their assumptions differ? To what extent can television journalists be seen to operate differently from print journalists? What are the major constraints which govern documentary film-making and news bulletins, how do these differ, and what impact does this have upon environmental reporting?

Section 1 discusses the question of the extent to which television initiated or responded to growing public concern about the environment. How personally concerned are television journalists about the environment and how do they perceive their role? To what extent does this conflict with the professional values of impartiality and balance? Finally, how far is their expertise a reflection of the increased professionalism of environmental groups and scientists? Section 2 explores the major constraints which influence news and current affairs programming and documentary film-making. This leads into a wider discussion of similarities and differences between television and press coverage of the environment.

## **SECTION ONE: AGENDA-SETTING AND TELEVISION COVERAGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

### **(i) The Natural History Tradition and the Greening of Television**

A key question which has interested researchers is the degree to which television initiated or responded to increasing public awareness about environmental issues during the late 1980s. Before one begins to consider this question, however, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between news and current affairs programming and documentary film-making. Whilst a strong natural history tradition has existed within documentary film-making for a number of years, news and current affairs programmes have tended to devote much less attention to environmental matters. There are several reasons for this; but one of the most important is that environmental problems tend to be long drawn-out processes which do not easily fit into the established format of television news, which revolves around a tight daily news cycle.

Peter Salmon (1988), former editor of the BBC2 documentary 'Nature', claims that there have been three main stages in environmental programming. The first stage was during the sixties when the groundwork was laid for the new environmental awareness of the 1990s with natural history programmes such as 'Survival'. The second stage was marked by environmental television taking on a new campaigning approach with the setting up of Channel Four. This period witnessed the production of such films as the hugely successful Yorkshire Television documentary, 'Windscale: the Nuclear Laundry'. According to Salmon:

"... mainstream film-makers in ITV and BBC were being forced to respond to the new growth of environmental interest in the independent sector. In doing so they put such programmes in the centre of television's current affairs and features output." (1988:25)

The third phase that he highlights is the recent climate of environmental awareness. This, he suggests, reflects increased public pressure, together with the increasing sophistication of environmental pressure groups and industry in using televisual means to their advantage.

During the 1970s and the 1980s, then, there was a gradual movement away from the traditional natural history style documentary, which divorced environmental issues from their social and political context, towards environmental television with a strong campaigning element encompassing a variety of different genres (cf. MacMillan, 1988). However, with a few notable exceptions such as the BBC 2 'Nature' slot, it was not until Mrs Thatcher's 'green' speech in September 1988 that the environment began to be treated seriously by the controllers of network news and current affairs programmes. For example, Salmon (1988) observed that the policy of one mainstream current affairs programme had previously been: 'it's the silly season, let's tackle an environmental story.'

Ashley Bruce, Producer of the Channel Four documentary, 'Fragile Earth', related how the attitudes of media professionals have changed towards the environment:

"... we used to go to the film festivals like 'Wild Screen' down in Bristol and we'd see BBC people there and we'd say to them how the hell can you talk like that without saying there's all the pesticide running off coming out of the wetlands that you're talking about. How can you do it without mentioning

that? And they said no, no, no. People don't want to know all that they just want to see the birds, you know... Well those same BBC people are probably now more militant than anybody else." (8th Dec. 1989, p.5)

However, television lagged behind the national press in the appointment of Environment Correspondents. It was not until early 1990 that the controllers of the BBC and ITN decided to appoint a specialist correspondent responsible for dealing with environmental affairs. Before this the environment was covered either by Science Correspondents, as one of a number of areas, or it was covered by general reporters such as Political Correspondents or Industrial Correspondents. Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN, explained:

"In the past we've always thought that separate components of environmental stories can be covered by other correspondents... I think in the last year it's become obvious that those separate components are best brought together into one person. And the environment is now a clearly defined field of journalism that it wasn't until twelve months ago really. Some of us have thought for a long time that that's been obviously the case but management didn't decide so until last year." (17th Jan. 1990, p.1)

Table 9, below, presents the dates when television Science Correspondents and Environment Correspondents were appointed.

### **Table 9**

#### **Dates When Science Correspondents and Environment Correspondents Appointed**

##### Science Correspondents

James Wilkinson, BBC - 1983/84

Lawrence McGinty, ITN - 1988

Ian Breach, Channel Four - 1982

##### Environment Correspondents

Justyn Jones, ITN - Jan. 1990

Ian Breach, BBC - Feb. 1990

Some of the American television networks appointed their first Environment Correspondents at around the same time. For example, ABC News employed their first specialist correspondents at the beginning of 1990 (cf. Hertsgaard, 1990; Koch, 1990). By spring 1990 neither NBC or CBS News had a full-time Environment Correspondent. However, Hertsgaard (1990) notes that CNN has an established track record of covering environmental matters; it formed an environmental unit consisting of eight members in 1980. Nevertheless, Hertsgaard argues that in general terms American television news networks have given the environment a very low priority:

"The simple fact is that the environment has traditionally not been seen as a very important news story by reporters or by their editorial or executive superiors." (1990:15)

The findings of this present study suggest that, in contrast to most of the Environment Correspondents for the national daily press, the Environment Correspondents on television news were external appointments. Justyn Jones was a reporter for The Western Mail and Ian Breach was Motoring Correspondent for The Guardian. Interestingly, Central Television, the first company to launch its own local environmental series, did not appoint its specialist environmental reporter, Hugh Owens, until July 1990.

Indeed, editors did not take the decision to employ Environment Correspondents until it became obvious that concern about environmental issues was not likely to be transient, and had become a mainstream area within journalism. According to Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor at ITN:

"... the crucially influential events were the ozone conference that Thatcher organised this summer and the briefing she organised on the greenhouse effect in Downing Street when it became obvious to anyone that environmental issues were very high on the political agenda." (17th Jan. 1990, pp.1-2)

But why did television take so long to act when virtually all the national newspapers had appointed Environment Correspondents by early 1989? The answer is unclear but what seems certain is that both print journalists and broadcasters only began to treat the environment as an established area within journalism once Mrs Thatcher publicly expressed her concern about ecological problems. As Woolley argues:



Schlesinger (1987) has shown that broadcasters do not perceive their ignorance of audiences as a problem. Rather, notions of professionalism are invoked in order to assert autonomy and to maintain a social distance from consumers. None of the broadcasters interviewed in the present study expressed any awareness of audience surveys concerning attitudes towards the environment. Indeed, one television news correspondent claimed:

"There's a sense in which broadcasters talk to each other, and talk to politicians and exclude the vast swathe of the population."

The broadcasters' images of the audience were generalised and vague. News and current affairs correspondents denied targeting material to particular sections of the population. For example, Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN, claimed:

"... I strongly believe that if you're in television news and you start targeting you're dead. You have to speak to every viewer and you have to try every time to speak to every viewer." (17th Jan. 1990, p.32)

Most news items about environmental issues on ITN tend to appear in the later news broadcasts which are longer, whilst BBC news items tend to be broadcast either on the breakfast time slots or on *News at One*. The BBC Science Correspondent, James Wilkinson, suggested that some of the items on the *1 O'Clock News* are slanted towards elderly people because they make up a large part of audience. However, Channel Four's extended news programmes are able to devote more space to environmental issues and they received an award from Media Natura in 1989 for the most sustained television coverage of ecological issues.

### **(iii) Audience Demand**

However, since Thatcher's 'green' speech the pressures of media competing for new markets patently played a role in the increased interest in public attitudes towards the environment. The interviewees agreed that during the period immediately following Mrs Thatcher's speech there was a marked increase in the number of environmental items on television. For example Lawrence McGinty, ITN's Science Editor, claimed:



"... I could now do four environment stories a week whereas five years ago if I did four a month people would accuse me of taking holidays in out of the way places." (17th Jan. 1990, p.15)

In particular, the BBC has been keen to investigate the market for this new type of environmental programming. In February 1989 the BBC issued a special green edition of the 'Radio Times' magazine which included a questionnaire about environmental issues. This was followed up with an edition of the 'Open Air' programme which asked viewers to phone in expressing their views about whether they wanted to see more green programmes, particularly green soap operas.

Over the last two years soap operas on all channels have gradually begun to include green storylines. Dot Cotton from 'Eastenders' has come to be associated with concern about refuse, Derek and Mavis of 'Coronation Street' have been used to voice concern about recycling waste, the Rogers family on 'Brookside' have been identified with a number of environmental problems and the script writers of 'Emmerdale Farm', which has long been associated with green issues, have included a whole range of ecological issues in the storylines. However, soap operas provide a rather limited format for dealing with weighty environmental issues. As Martin Deeson maintains:

"Unfortunately the way soap operas are structured makes it difficult for them to treat important issues in a serious way. Soap operas are about characters and not ideas, so for them to deal with an issue, the scriptwriters tend to make a character represent that issue, and be in dramatic conflict with all the others." (1990:23)

The broadcasters questioned generally claimed that television and the national press followed rather than initiated increased environmental awareness. They viewed television as having a gradual accumulative effect rather than an immediate impact. For example, Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN, suggested:

"... I don't think the media have played a leading part. By and large the media have followed... I mean I'm sure that if the media had not done so many pieces on ozone or hadn't given so much coverage of issues like ozone and greenhouse then politicians wouldn't have cottoned on so quickly. But I think that's derivative from... changes in scientific knowledge." (17th Jan. 1990,p.3)

However, Tim Gardam, former editor of the BBC documentary 'Panorama', saw television as having a more powerful effect. He claimed that: "we tend to formulate and articulate thoughts and feelings which people haven't yet registered." (4th Dec. 1989). Gardam suggested that the new environmental awareness began to emerge during the 1970s when a breakdown in corporate socialism occurred. Mrs Thatcher tapped into the idea that people were excited about starting up on their own and the ideas of free enterprise and economic liberation. However, this backfired on the Government in the 1980s when the contradictions of free market enterprise became apparent and people began to realise that there was a dialectical relationship between the standard of living and the quality of life.

**(iv) Professional and Personal Values**

Many of the personal and professional values espoused by the television journalists concord with those of the print journalists. However, some of their comments reflect their scientific training for, in contrast to newspaper correspondents, three out of the six broadcasters interviewed possessed a scientific background. All the interviewees agreed with the print journalists that the physical deterioration of the environment was a crucial factor in triggering environmental issues to move to the top of the political agenda. Mrs Thatcher's 'green' speech was thought to reflect these physical changes. For example, a typical comment was that of the BBC's Science Correspondent, James Wilkinson:

"I think those two things, the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect, both of which were really prompted by scientific evidence, those two things I think made her realise that this was a very serious issue. So I think it's those two things rather than anything that Friends of the Earth have done." (5th Dec. 1989, p.4)

It is significant that Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN, was the only broadcaster to express the view that the 'objective' deterioration of the environment involves subjective judgements. He suggested:

"... well they're not really objective... they're changes in the way that we perceive the damage that we're doing to the environment based on discovery of objective facts." (17th Jan. 1990,p.2)

Some of the broadcasters also saw the activities of environmental groups as an important factor. For example, Ian Breach, the BBC's Environment Correspondent, maintained:

"I think that the pressure of Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace are largely responsible for that. There are more members of environmentalist groups in this country than there are in political parties in the whole of Europe... and lots of pressure on local newspapers, local television networks, and upwards through to the national networks and the national newspapers. And I think that, as much as anything, is responsible for the way the climate of opinion has changed. I think Thatcher's Royal Society speech was a trigger for, for instance, News and Current Affairs to say well maybe we will employ an Environment Correspondent after all. But the pressure, the impetus, was already there." (27th Nov. 1990, pp.23-24)

The broadcasters who were questioned about their views of the importance of environmental issues agreed with the print journalists that global warming, the ozone layer, water quality and toxic waste disposal were the most serious issues. A typical comment was that of Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor at ITN:

"The greenhouse effect without a doubt. All the other issues are subsidiary because of the potential scale of the impact... the greenhouse effect could have." (17th Jan. 1990, p.7)

They expressed a large amount of personal concern about the environment. For example, Ashley Bruce, producer of 'Fragile Earth', claimed to possess a keen interest in environmental matters:

"Well, that's very strong. I mean I'm genuinely worried about the greenhouse effect, personally even worried... But then the side of me that is a film maker or the producer or the director is saying it might be better to give a better, fairer picture of such and such but it's boring throw it out." (8th Dec. 1989, p.28)

Indeed, it is highly significant that this conflict between personal concerns and professional values was not volunteered by the newsmen. James Wilkinson, the BBC Science Correspondent has recently published Green or Bust?, which discusses the scientific evidence about global environmental issues. Indeed, when questioned about his personal interest in the environment, he replied:

"Ah well I'm very interested in environmental stories at the moment. I think it's the most important area facing mankind. Ah some of these issues are of particular importance and so this is why I think it's so important that they should be reported accurately and fairly and prominently." (5th Dec. 1989, p.7)

Typically, the newsmen respond to this dilemma by appealing to notions of balance and impartiality. For example, James Wilkinson claimed:

"Certainly as far as I'm concerned, I do try to ensure that when I do an environmental piece it is accurate and fair and balanced." (5th Dec. 1989, p.6)

Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN went further:

"Ah I try very hard not to have a personal interest in my own stories because... I mean more than almost any area the environment has the ability to seduce you into being a believer and I think as a journalist, especially on TV, it's extremely dangerous." (17th Jan. 1990, pp. 6-7)

However the BBC Environment Correspondent, Ian Breach, argued:

"... I don't believe in the concept of balance as it's espoused by the BBC, because I think that if all you do is say x says y and a says b and leave the viewer to make up his own mind, then it just leaves them confused." (24th Nov. 1990, p.25)

Although the newsmen frequently appealed to notions of balance and impartiality, the broadcasters generally agreed it is not vital that environmental reporters have a scientific training. A typical comment was that of ITN's Science Editor, Lawrence McGinty:

"I think that it's entirely irrelevant. Well I think it's important that they have some judgement about the facts and having a scientific background gives you some measure of judgement about data and information because it is one of the things that you are trained to do. But I don't think that it is at all essential because you can get the same approach from all sorts of other trainings... commerce, sociology or whatever... In fact sometimes on TV it's a hindrance because if you're interviewing people on camera and you tell them you know something about it then they will have a conversation with you assuming that you know things about it and they use phrases that they know you know but the viewer doesn't actually know them at all." (17th Jan. 1990, p.13)

The BBC's Science Correspondent, James Wilkinson, was alone in arguing scientific training is essential. He responded:

"... I think it's very important that Environment Correspondents ought to have a scientific background... and to understand the background to some of these issues you do need a scientific training I think. It helps anyway." (5th Dec. 1989, p.12)

This may partly reflect the different approach which the BBC takes to science reporting. James Wilkinson has close contacts with a number of scientific bodies such as the Royal Society of Chemistry. Also, he is on the steering committee of the CIBA foundation, which has provided a media resource service on technical and scientific matters since 1985. However, as Karpf (1988) argues, close relations with mainstream scientists may lead reporters to share the same outlook and could be disadvantageous.

But how far is the television journalist's experience a reflection of the growing professionalism of their sources? Who are the primary sources and which do they view as most credible. Few researchers have begun to systematically explore these issues. The interview findings of the present study, presented below, suggest that the broadcasters tend to appeal to notions of professional impartiality to a greater extent than the print journalists.

#### **(v) Primary Definers and Professional Routines**

Mass communications research has established that broadcasters in general tend to rely upon official sources of information (Hall et al., 1978; Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Gandy, 1980 and Karpf, 1988). A study conducted by Hansen (1990b) compared news coverage of environmental issues by TV *Avisen*, a Danish television news network, and the BBC *9 O'Clock News*. Table 10, reproduced from Hansen (1990b), indicates that government, industry and experts constitute the key primary sources for environmental coverage by the BBC *9 O'Clock News*.

**Table 10**

**The Relative Prominence of Different Types of Primary Definer**

ACTORS	ALL		9 O'CLOCK NEWS		TV-AVISEN	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Public body or authority representative	26	22.6	3	9.7	23	27.4
Government/Conservative MP	24	20.9	2	6.5	22	26.2
Independent scientist/expert	20	17.4	3	9.7	17	20.2
Industry: management representative	14	12.2	1	3.2	13	15.5
Industry: labour	12	10.4			12	14.3
Small business, private entrepreneurs	7	6.1	3	9.7	4	4.8
Individual non-affiliated citizen	7	6.1	4	12.9	3	3.6
Int. grp.: established environmental group	7	6.1	1	3.2	6	7.1
Opposition MP	6	5.2			6	7.1
Judiciary/Judges/Lawyers repres. parties involved	6	5.2			6	7.1
Farmers/Fishermen as individuals	5	4.3			5	6.0
Int.grp:Agriculture and Fishery	5	5.7			5	6.9
Local government official Int. grp.:industry	3	2.6	1	3.2	2	2.4
Non UK or DK Party	2	1.7			2	2.4
Royalty	2	1.7	1	3.2	1	1.2
Int. grp: Small business private entrepreneurs	1	0.9	1	3.2		
Int. grp: consumers	1	0.9			1	1.2
Monetary	1	0.9			1	1.2
EEC/UN Official	1	0.9			1	1.2
Other	5	4.3	1	3.2	4	4.8

*Source: Hansen 1990b:22.*

Although content analysis indicates that environmental news reporters, at least on the BBC *9 O'Clock News* and *TV Avisen*, tend to rely upon government, industry and experts, the broadcasters interviewed in the present study claimed they were cautious about any group with an obvious vested interest and sought independent verification of the facts. They frequently appealed to professionally instilled notions of balance and objectivity. A typical comment was that of Ashley Bruce, producer of 'Fragile Earth':

"There's a vested interest that any official statement is going to try and reassure and say it's all under control. And any environmental group is likely to exaggerate what the problem is and between the two you try and analyse what the realistic situation is." (8th Dec. 1989, p.17)

Previous mass communications research has indicated that broadcasters covering environmental affairs, like print journalists, tend to depend upon orthodox scientific sources (Karpf, 1988). The broadcasters questioned maintained that their relationships with scientists were professional and that scientists are becoming more open to the media.

Scientists from the University of East Anglia who are researching into global warming, such as Mick Kelly, have received a great deal of media attention. Ashley Bruce, producer of 'Fragile Earth' suggested that one of the reasons for this is that they share the same general outlook:

"You're on immediately the same wavelength as some. I mean Mick Kelley from the Climatology Department at the University of East Anglia is someone you instantly relate to and you know he thinks the same way as you do, probably. And it's then both of you addressing the problem of how to get across some sort of indication of... how complex it is to try and model the globe's atmosphere and yet not baffle anyone." (8th Dec. 1989, p.13)

However, whilst they recognised that there is a general trend in this direction they emphasized that it is difficult to generalise about scientists; obviously some are better at communicating with the media than others. Lawrence McGinty, ITN's Science Editor, noted that the scientists who do tend to contact the media are unrepresentative of scientists as a whole:

"... scientists who are good at approaching the media tend to be the ones who want to. As a self selecting group they're not typical and their opinions aren't typical so I think you have to be quite careful that you don't actually just phone round the four guys who you talked to and assume that's the scientific consensus. And although they're more sophisticated and more open than they used to be, in part because of the peer pressure on them is less... they're still not actually very good at it." (17th Jan. 1990, p.30)

Similarly the BBC's Science Correspondent, James Wilkinson, maintained:

"There's still an awful long way to go. Some are very good, some are not very good. I don't think generally there's less suspicion than there used to be." (5th Dec. 1989, p.17)

James Wilkinson went on to suggest that if mainstream scientists believe that there is a major environmental threat this gives the story more credibility than if non-orthodox scientists make such claims:

"I mean if scientists are fairly agreed that something serious is happening then I would take more notice of them than I would necessarily of an organisation like Greenpeace claiming something's happening because it doesn't quite have the authority of some other organisations or that conventional scientists have." (5th Dec. 1989, pp.10-11)

Very little is known about the credibility broadcasters attach to different environmental organisations. Peter Salmon, former editor of 'Nature' admitted he used to hold a stereotypical view of environmental pressure groups:

"My own image of environmentalists was the classic stereotype - beard, sandals and muesli. They were, I had thought, a band of zealots who, unlike the nuclear power they opposed, generated more heat than light." (1988:24)

As with the Environment Correspondents writing for national newspapers, the two main environmental groups that broadcasters claimed that they used most were Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. Other environmental pressure group sources included: the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society; the Marine Conservation Society; the Flora and Fauna Preservation Society; the International Association for the Environment and Development; the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

The broadcasters mentioned smaller more locally based groups as well as large, national organisations. According to the Science Editor at ITN, Lawrence McGinty, these are: "... in a way more reliable. I mean they may be more committed but they tend to have much more information." (17th Jan. 1990) Mike Walsh, reporter for 'World in Action'



claimed he made a conscious effort to establish links with local branches of environmental pressure groups.

All the broadcasters interviewed maintained that they held a good professional relationship with environmental pressure groups. Also they stressed that environmental groups and the media rely upon each other. For example, Ashley Bruce, producer of 'Fragile Earth' claimed: "It's a straight forward professional thing. We need them and they need us, basically." (8th Dec. 1990)

The television journalists generally agreed that in broad terms environmental groups are becoming more sophisticated in dealing with the media. For example, the BBC's Environment Correspondent, Ian Breach stated:

"They're managing the news in the way that other sectors of society manage the news... they've made themselves key players in this business of translating into news what is happening out there and they're very good at it. You know Friends of the Earth, for instance, have a clearly delineated set of people who are responsible for separate areas, whether it's air pollution, or tropical rainforests, or water and toxics, and so on. And they've got somebody who they can wheel out to talk about CFCs. Same with Greenpeace and World Wide Fund for Nature. And they've got a media list with home numbers and all the things that make life as a journalist a little bit easier." (27th Nov. 1990, p.10)

The television journalists were not so critical of Greenpeace as the print journalists. They emphasized that they treat all their sources with scepticism and it is the fault of the media for relying too much upon information from Greenpeace without checking it. For example Ashley Bruce, producer of 'Fragile Earth', argued:

"I mean I think it's rather silly of the media to sort of heavily rely on something like Greenpeace, which is what they do, and expect them to be giving them absolutely correct information and expect them to be giving them shock horror stories all at the same time and expect them to be experts... It's probably the media that probably ought to be criticised in that sense." (8th Dec 1989, p.14)

However, the BBC's Science Correspondent, James Wilkinson, maintained:

"I'm afraid that some Environment Correspondents regard themselves as the public relations arm of Greenpeace. They've no scientific background themselves and they tend to be... very uncritical of the way that they report things. It's been fairly one-sided in many ways." (5th Dec. 1989, p.6)

The broadcasters suggested that Friends of the Earth are more sophisticated at dealing with the media than Greenpeace. For example James Wilkinson claimed:

"... the standard of their reports has improved and they are well argued and scientifically, well, accurate, scientifically accurate. So I mean they are an excellent organisation." (5th Dec. 1989, p.11)

Mike Walsh , reporter for 'World in Action' concurred:

"... I think they're more sophisticated than Greenpeace. Ah but Greenpeace are sophisticated and will become increasingly so. They're very well funded, both of them, and you can see the signs that they're becoming... their bureaucracies are getting bigger and press relations are more and more sophisticated." (10th Jan. 1990, p.12)

Again the broadcasters mentioned that Andrew Lees, the water and toxics campaigner at Friends of the Earth, has developed a particularly sophisticated approach towards the media. Mike Walsh claimed that Lees is especially attuned to what journalists require:

"...Lees, for instance, knew that we would buy it if he offered us a couple of exclusive reports. He had another one which he refused to give us because he could see that it would get mileage on other shows. And he knew that we would get his views and Friends of the Earth's interests covered in 'World in Action' if he made it worth our while journalistically." (10th Jan. 1989,p.12)

Only two of the broadcasters were directly asked whether they tended to approach environmental pressure groups or whether it was the other way round. Again it is difficult to generalise. Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor at ITN, claimed that half the time the impetus came from the pressure groups and half the time from him:

"... they make more approaches to me because they tend to send me press releases but I take less of those up. So I mean if you actually looked at the stories I did and said, you know, where did the initial impetus for that story come from I think it would probably be fifty/fifty." (17th Jan. 1990, p.29)

One would suspect that Lawrence McGinty would receive more press releases from environmental pressure groups than Mike Walsh on 'World in Action', which only does the occasional programme on environmental issues. Mike Walsh claimed that he tends to approach them rather than the other way round:

" It varies... I suppose we tend to go to them. Ah, the ICI story, for instance, I went to them, to Greenpeace, because I heard a very nasty story about ICI which I'd never checked out but that's what prompted me to keep on going to Greenpeace." (10th Jan. 1990, p.27)

The broadcasters interviewed were generally appeared less suspicious of industry than the print journalists. Their relationships ranged from being described as 'good' to virtually 'non-existent'. Obviously there is far more scope to criticise industry in documentaries on the environment than on news bulletins so relations between documentary reporters/producers and industry tended to be more strained. For example, Mike Walsh, a reporter for 'World in Action', claimed he was on very bad terms with the Imperial Chemical Industry (ICI) after he made a programme attacking their pollution records:

"I think my relationship with ICI is totally non-existent at the moment! They are... very angry at our programme. They wrote to our Chairman about it probably because we were very critical. They had never been criticised to this extent." (10th Jan. 1990, p.15)

The interviews, then, suggest that the broadcasters generally agree their key sources have become more professional in dealing with the media. Indeed, their growing expertise is, to some extent, a reflection of the professional approach which industry, scientists and environmental groups have developed. In particular, they are increasingly targeting their material to particular media and they possess a more sophisticated understanding of the major constraints which influence environmental coverage. Section 2 will consider some of the most important constraints affecting environmental reporting and discuss how this differs for press and television.

## **SECTION TWO: CONSTRAINTS UPON TELEVISION AND PRESS TREATMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS**

### **(i) Visual Angles**

Perhaps one of the greatest differences between press and television coverage of environmental issues concerns the relative weight attached to the visual quality of news stories. Since television is a visual medium the availability and quality of pictures is of much greater importance. Mike Walsh, reporter for 'World in Action', claimed:

"... the press has a much easier job in that it doesn't have to produce its interviews, it doesn't have to get pictures and therefore it can get into a secure area like a nuclear power station much more easily than a camera crew. It's much more difficult to shoot pictures and you do need pictures to get the impact... You can't cut up interviews in television even if you did without the sources, you just can't do it. You're very limited in making a bad interview look good and interesting." (10th Jan. 1990, p.24)

The broadcasters maintained that the availability of pictures is a particular problem when searching for new angles on environmental issues. For example, the BBC's Environment Correspondent, Ian Breach, argued:

"... we're about pictures... we're about words as well but words are captions to pictures, essentially... Above all environment stories really need good pictures... global warming is very difficult because you can't actually see global warming. You can see car exhausts and you can see smoking factory chimneys and you can hear people talking about it. But when you've done that you've more or less done the kind of story that I've done twenty times this year because the ingredients are almost always the same... unless you're making a documentary with clever graphics then it's hard to ring the changes." (24th Nov. 1990, pp.10-11)

Indeed, certain environmental issues tend to receive more coverage because they make good television pictures. For example, the seal virus attracted a great deal of television coverage because seals are so visually appealing (see Chapter 8). In contrast, some of the issues surrounding nature conservation have received less coverage partly because they are difficult to explain in visual terms. For instance, Hansen (1990b) found that only 6.5% of environmental coverage on the BBC *9 O'Clock News* was about conservation and public access to nature. Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN, claimed:

"If you're doing habitat it's hard because habitat doesn't move. And also because habitat is difficult to film to give the idea of the complexity of the eco-system which is really what you're talking about. I mean you're not saying this is a pretty conservable landscape, therefore we should conserve it. You're trying to say this has got a rich complexity of animal communities. All you can show is close ups of two or three." (17th Jan. 1990, p.14)

**(ii) Political Yardsticks**

Another reason why nature conservation stories seldom appear on the BBC *9 O'Clock News* is that they tend not to be regarded as mainstream political news. Ian Breach, Environment Correspondent for the BBC, observed:

"... the Nine considers itself to be a political news round up and regards stories like the disappearance of wetlands, the digging up of peat bogs, damage to or destruction of special sites of scientific interest... difficult to fit alongside what it regards as the significant news stories of the day. Ah there was a story about the World Wide Fund for Nature about two months ago... That was carried by the One and it was carried on the Six. The Nine didn't think it was an important story... so there's a continual battle over not just whether it's important but over what actually constitutes an environment story." (24th Nov. 1990, pp.3-4)

Indeed, a fundamental problem is that television thrives on immediate, dramatic events whilst environmental problems tend to be long, drawn-out processes which do not easily fit into daily news cycles. Research suggests that television news tends to be more event-led than the press. Wilkins and Patterson's (1987) comparative study of newspaper and television reports of the Chernobyl disaster and the Bhopal incident found that television reports were more likely to concentrate upon the immediate effects of incidents, rather than discussing their wider significance and long term impact. Ian Breach, Environment Correspondent for BBC News, observed:

"There is never a day when you're going to be able to say suddenly the last remaining mating couple of... whatever disappeared yesterday and that's the end of it folks. It's a remorseless erosion of the ecosystem which is a much more difficult story to tell. And the occasional outbreaks of illnesses among certain animals, they make the headlines, but they're not used as a punctuation mark in that overall story of damage to our planetary system... It's also very difficult to keep a story running... And there's got to be some concrete thing, a pictorially vivid theme to go back and say well this is what's happened." (24th Nov. 1990, p.15)

News broadcasts are particularly oriented to the present, and to staged environmental events involving famous personalities. Ian Breach maintained:

"... the environment almost invariably starts at the bottom of the news running order, for every bulletin. It's still regarded as a footnote issue unless there's a major announcement like Mrs Thatcher opens the Climate Research Centre at Bracknell and therefore global warming is the news story of the day unless something else pushes it down. There have only been two occasions in the last eight months when the environment has been the lead story. That was one of them, the other was the publication of the White Paper on the environment." (24th Nov. 1990, p.2)

### **(iii) Financial Resources**

Furthermore Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN maintained that Third World issues are hard to cover on television news compared to documentaries or print media because of the expense of filming:

"I mean the one issue that leaps to mind is rainforests which has not been very well covered in the UK, in general... well better in print and documentary... That tends to be true of all Third World issues because it's so expensive to do because, in TV terms, to travel and the shooting is so expensive that you can go and do it once and that's it. And it's not the nature of the issue, the issue is an on-going issue." (17th Jan. 1990, p.16)

Indeed, the costs of filming are generally more difficult to justify in terms of short news broadcasts than for documentaries. Ian Breach, Environment Correspondent for the BBC, concurred:

"Another problem as far as international stories are concerned is where are the pictures? Unless we're using library pictures and we're using the same library pictures over and over. Are they going to pay for me to go to Brazil to do a story about the clear felling of the tropical rainforest? No, not unless a senior parliamentary figure, for instance, leading a select committee of inquiry, wants to go over there and I somehow manage to get cheaply on the same plane, because they haven't got the money." (24th Nov. 1990, p.5)

However, it is generally easier to obtain resources for international coverage on current affairs series. Ian Breach argued:

"It takes a lot of setting up but once you've got the green light you get the resources, which was why last year, when I was working on 'Country File' we

were able to go to Russia and Siberia.. and put together three programmes from three weeks filming, two about farming in Russia and one about its environmental problems." (27th Nov. 1990, p.6)

**(iv) Time Constraints**

In addition to visual quality, costs and the emphasis on the present, news broadcasts are based around particularly tight daily schedules and time acts as a major constraint (cf. Schlesinger, 1987). Television news broadcasts tend to be very short and summarising material succinctly without distortion can present a huge problem. James Wilkinson, Science Correspondent for BBC News, claimed:

"When you're doing a television story that might only last for a couple of minutes what you're leaving people is not a vast amount of information because they wouldn't take it in. It's very easy to get information overload on a television story. What we're leaving them with is an impression and quite rightly we have to ensure that the impression we're leaving them with is an accurate one." (5th Dec. 1989, p.12)

Similarly, ITN's Science Editor, Lawrence McGinty, responded:

"...In the end I think it's down to your own judgement and on TV there's a whole manner of subtle ways of creating impressions... Knowing what weight to give to the facts and how to present them is the difficult thing and occasionally that has been crucially difficult." (17th Jan. 1990, pp.10-11)

The average news item about environmental issues on television news bulletins is only about 110 seconds long (cf. Hansen, 1990b). But national news bulletins vary in length. Environmental issues are far more likely to be carried on breakfast or mid-day slots than on later bulletins, when competition between stories is much fiercer. According to the BBC's Environment Correspondent, Ian Breach:

"... different bulletins have different criteria. You'll find there are far fewer environment stories on the Nine O'Clock news than there are on the Six and the One. The One is always grateful for any crumbs because they come in first thing in the morning and they've got a clean slate whereas news events develop during the day. International time zones mean American news starts to filter through late afternoon and early evening. Toyko stock markets come to the end of the day during our morning and so on. So the One is always delighted to have items suggested from early morning and the Six might run them in a slightly changed form. But the Nine is reluctant on several counts...

it's got an innate disinclination to, as it would consider, recycle stories that have appeared on the One or the Six and an even more determined resistance to stories that have run on breakfast television." (27th Nov. 1990, pp.2-3)

However, some Environment Correspondents have developed other media outlets which allow them to explore environmental issues in greater depth. For example, Ian Breach, the BBC's Environment Correspondent, has contributed to the BBC farming and agricultural series, 'Country File', and to 'Newsround', the BBC news programme for the younger viewers. Indeed, Ian Breach claimed:

"... the community of interest between the audience... and the programme makers themselves is manifestly strong in the area of environment coverage in current affairs and documentary programmes. 'Nature' for instance, 'Newsround' the children's news programme. 'Newsround' has a first rate track record of covering environment stories often before the news, if not exclusive of the news and so has 'Blue Peter'... There are often occasions where 'Blue Peter' and 'Newsround' carry the stories that I'm not able to get on the One or the Six or the Nine. And I've done things for 'Newsround' which haven't appeared on it on that night's Six or Nine." (27th Nov. 1990, p.18)

Documentary film-makers have much more time at their disposal to produce in-depth, analytical items than do news reporters but usually the audience is much more specialised. For example, Ashley Bruce, producer of 'Fragile Earth', maintained:

"Who watches on Channel Four at seven-fifteen on a Sunday? Realistically it's a certain sort of audience... there's the committed, there's the vaguely interested and there's the not interested... you can assume that if it's going to be a subject like that for an hour you're going to lose quite a few people to begin with." (8th Dec. 1989, pp.18-19)

Indeed, documentaries tend to have a greater political impact than news bulletins because they can explore issues in much more depth. Ian Breach, the BBC's Environment Correspondent, argued:

"I think they have considerable influence because of their nature; they're reflective and give people the time to think through the subject that's being covered. News is important as well because it leaves spot impressions. The news is often no more than a punctuation mark in a story of which the public is already aware." (27th Nov. 1990, p.29)



**(v) Editorial Pressures**

The broadcasters interviewed, like the print journalists, claimed to enjoy a large amount of freedom in the coverage of environmental matters. For example, James Wilkinson, the BBC's Science Correspondent, maintained:

"Ah, well total freedom in the sense that nobody decides for me how I'm going to do something. If I want to do an issue in a particular way then I'll do it in a particular way... there's no sort of proprietorial pressure brought to bear on correspondents here like it sometimes is in newspapers." (5th Dec. 1989, p.18)

However, previous research has suggested that broadcasters covering scientific matters in general are constrained by organisational, editorial and legal factors (Karpf, 1988). For example, Ashley Bruce related how the 'Fragile Earth' team had to tread carefully over the claims made about a toxic waste disposal company:

"We can't go round saying they're a load of old cowboys who skate right on the legal edge continuously and always have done. They know we can't say that because they'll sue us and we know they'll sue us." (8th Dec. 1989, p.15)

Editorial pressures are another major constraint. For example, Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor at ITN, admitted:

"Ah in a sense I have to reflect other people's values because I don't decide what gets on. I only put forward suggestions to programme editors so I have to reflect what they like." (17th Jan. 1990, p.35)

Also there is fierce competition between environmental stories and other areas of news. James Wilkinson, Science Correspondent for BBC News, maintained:

"... the main constraint is persuading the editors of the bulletins that your story is more important than all the other stories they've got to run, that they want to run." (5th Dec. 1989, p.15)

The broadcasters generally denied that there was any political interference brought to bear on them. However the general differences in the approaches of the BBC and ITV came across in some of the interviews. 'World in Action' was seen as left-wing, radical and

challenging establishment ideas whereas 'Panorama' was seen as more right-wing and under the control of the establishment.

The BBC's Science Correspondent, James Wilkinson, claimed that: "...the BBC operates in a way that gives people freedom to be, you know, to say what they want to say." (5th Dec. 1989). However, Schlesinger (1987) has demonstrated that the BBC's command structure acts as a powerful mode of control. Indeed, Schlesinger observes:

"... various features of the BBC's editorial system act routinely to ensure broad conformity with the desired approach to the news... Many newsmen who read earlier drafts of this study expressed surprise at the pervasive nature of the control system... They did not, in general, consider themselves kept on a short leash, and were unconscious most of the time of the highly ramified nature of the editorial system, and its impact on their work. They espouse, as it were, the BBC's micro-myth of independence. This stresses the autonomy of the production staff, and delegation of responsibility downward from the Director-General." (1987:135)

Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN, also claimed to have autonomy. He suggested that journalists at ITV have more freedom than those at the BBC:

"... I mean they see their job to tell people what are the crucial important issues in any one day.... I think we have much more freedom to go away from that agenda and say we're not going to do that it's boring.... what they do is more closely tied to the agenda that comes up every day defined by politicians, companies, lobby groups and so on." (17th Jan. 1990, pp.39-40)

Indeed, the myth of autonomy appears to be pervasive among both BBC and ITV newsmen. Typically, they view themselves as free agents, uninfluenced by corporate ideology.

#### **(vi) Media Interdependence**

Mass communications research has established that there is a great deal of inter-reliance between press, radio and television for story ideas. Elliott (1972) found that about twenty-five percent of story ideas thought up in the first week of researching for a new television series originated from newspaper cuttings. Furthermore, Karpf (1988) has

suggested that there is often a cyclical process at work whereby stories that are featured in the press get taken up by television and filter through to the press again. As MacMillan (1988) observes:

"... TV news uses the press as part of its ideas 'input'; television creates interest in the press which, again, feeds back into television." (1988:23)

However, not suprisingly, the present study found print and television journalists were generally reluctant to admit the extent to which media rely upon one another. Despite claiming that they did not generally use information from other media, the interview material suggested that there was a great deal of inter-dependence. Richard North, Environment Correspondent for The Independent, claimed that he did not pay any attention to other newspapers and to television, but this was later undermined by the observations he made about the general field of environmental journalism. Indeed, he went on to later admit: "I will follow a story up on another paper or on television" (15th March 1989, p. 19)

David Jones, former Environment Editor of Today was more forthcoming. When asked about how much he relied on other media for story ideas he responded:

"Oh all the time... there's a lot of cross pollination... I should think fifty percent of the story ideas come from watching and reading... watching a television programme." (3rd Nov. 1989)

Richard Palmer, former Environment Correspondent for The Sunday Times, suggested that newspaper articles tend to generate television news items, not the other way round:

"I think that TV news, particularly, is quite bad at generating its own stories... particularly the BBC. They tend to be very reactive, just reactive to the day. I suppose that's partly because they're a daily operation and they just don't seem to have the time or the resources to explore issues in the same way a Sunday newspaper can." (14th Feb. 1989, p.18)

Indeed, as Rubin and Sachs (1973) have observed:

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Indeed, as Rubin and Sachs (1973) have observed:

"The use of newspapers is as high among newspaper reporters as among broadcasters, suggesting not only a dependence of broadcasting on newspaper stories but also a dependence of newspapers on one another." (1973: 40)

The broadcasters interviewed in the present study were also reluctant to admit the extent of media inter-dependence. For example, James Wilkinson, the BBC's Science Correspondent, claimed:

"Oh I suppose we feed off each other most of the time but, ah, not a great deal. We sometimes get ideas from the 'New Scientist' or newspapers or something. We might use the odd fact from a cutting but generally we usually go to primary sources." (5th Dec. 1989, p.15)

This aspect of media culture tends to reinforce existing ideas about the environment. As Karpf has noted:

"There's a similarity and continuity in the view of the world presented by television, and its range of material on most subjects is heavily weighed towards ideas already elaborated through the mass media." (1988:103)

One example of a television programme spawning press interest was the 'World in Action' documentary, Toxic Trail, broadcast in December 1989, which exposed ICI's record on the pollution of the environment. Two days after it was broadcast an article appeared in The Financial Times with the headline, "ICI sees need to improve pollution record." ICI was quick to respond to the allegations of the programme and to reassure the public about their concern about pollution problems in Britain.

Many of the print journalists were critical of television news coverage of environmental issues. For example, A typical comment was that of Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent for The Times:

"I don't think the major network news programmes have particularly good records on the environment. It's partly because they're so dramatic... so picture-led. I mean it's all about sexy pictures. And it's all about... a minute and a quarter is a good show.. somebody gets seven minutes and they talk about it in the pub for six weeks... I think where newspapers score is that when you get something which gives you news but it also gives you a certain amount of in-depth analysis and in-depth coverage of specialist issues. With

TV those two things are separated. You have a TV bulletin that lasts half an hour and then if you want the in-depth stuff you've got to go to a specialist programme at half past eight which lasts half an hour... I'm not impressed by environment coverage on television. I mean they haven't got the room." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.28)

However, many of the television journalists interviewed were critical of press coverage of the environment, particularly the popular press. For example, James Wilkinson, the BBC's Science Correspondent maintained:

"... I speak as a former newspaper man myself for ten years in Fleet Street, in newspapers if you like it doesn't matter how accurate. I mean newspapers almost relish the idea of hardening up stories and exaggerating things and making a splash... That's not how I see the BBC's job and I think, we, hopefully, tend to be much more careful about our facts than most newspapers, than many newspapers, especially the popular newspapers. I'm talking about primarily the popular newspapers not the heavy newspapers." (5th Dec. 1989, p.7)

Although there is a large degree of inter-media dependence, then, there are important differences between the way in which print and broadcast journalists operate. Also, there are significant differences between the way in which news bulletins and documentaries handle environmental affairs and in terms of their impact.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has discussed the general findings from the interviews with television news and current affairs journalists, and documentary film-makers, and has drawn out some of the differences between these genres. It suggested that television news-men, in particular, appealed to notions of impartiality and balance and the conflict between personal and professional values was not presented as a problem. Also, the interviews demonstrated that there has been a fundamental shift in the way that environmental reporting is conceived of by journalists working in television. The environment is now viewed as an area within its own right and there was a great deal of competition among channels to capture this new market. Moreover the interviews indicated that although there are important differences in the way newspapers and television operate, the media agenda of broadcasters and print journalists tends to converge, there being fads and fashions in the coverage of ecological issues.





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# **Chapter Seven**

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## **THE PRODUCTION OF NEWS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS, THE DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT, AND THE MEDIA**

- (i) The Development of Media Awareness
- (ii) The Changing Agenda of the 1990s
- (iii) Media Access after Mrs Thatcher's Speech
- (iv) The Organisation of Media Relations by Environmental Groups
- (v) Competition and Co-ordination between Environmental organisations
- (vi) Which Media do Environmental Groups use Most?
- (vii) Monitoring the Media
- (viii) News Management and the Manipulation of the Agenda
- (ix) Resources
  - a) Income
  - b) Staff

## **Introduction**

This chapter explores the media strategies of environmental groups and the Department of the Environment. Few studies have focused upon the British environmental lobby and the media. Indeed the most comprehensive survey of environmental groups and the media was conducted in the late 1970s (cf. Lowe and Goyder, 1983). However, in the last decade fundamental changes have been wrought in the tactics and power of the environmental lobby. Membership of environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has soared, particularly between 1987 and 1989. This has been accompanied by a marked increase in income, in the numbers of full-time staff employed by environmental bodies, and by a general expansion of their press offices. Indeed, over the last decade the environmental lobby has gained increased access to government and its political influence has grown.

This study focuses upon four very different environmental organisations: Friends of the Earth (FoE), Greenpeace, the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection (NSCA), and the National Trust. Whilst Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace represent two of the new-style pressure groups with a campaigning stance, the National Trust and the National Society for Clean Air represent older, quasi-official, interest groups. Interviews were carried out with representatives of these organisations between 1988 and 1991. Additionally, two interviews were carried out with Department of the Environment press officers during 1991 (see Appendix 1).

The chapter concentrates upon the emergence of the new campaign-oriented environmental groups in the 1970s who have developed a more pro-active approach to media relations. It is suggested that in general terms environmental groups have become more sophisticated in dealing with the media. Non-governmental organisations are increasingly targeting their information to particular groups within society. However, they experience a fundamental tension over reaching membership through the media, upon which they largely depend for funds, and influencing politicians. A further difficulty is that in order to attract new members they need to develop their own identities, but they also need to cultivate the image of a unified movement. A further point to be developed concerns the degree to which

environmental groups are tied into current political thinking, or to politically neutral activity, and the way this constrains their influence upon the policy-making process. Also, the government is able to exert indirect influence on environmental bodies, through the provision of government grants. Finally, the role of budgetary constraints is discussed. Here, attention is focused upon the way resources influence the media strategies adopted by voluntary and statutory bodies.

**(i) The Development of Media Awareness**

Little empirical work has been conducted into environmental groups and the media. This is somewhat surprising since it is clearly an important area of research, given the degree to which journalists depend upon such sources for information (Morgan, 1988; Warren, 1990). As Chris Rose, director of Media Natura, argues:

"Most press reports present it as original investigative journalism but it mainly comes from NGO feeds. Correspondents take the feeds but don't always credit them as they think this would lose them credibility with their editors."  
(Quoted in Warren, 1990:80)

Only a handful of studies have analysed the strategies employed by news sources and the degree of success achieved in news-management. The few studies which have devoted attention to this issue are, with some exceptions, rather dated (Greenberg, 1985; Gandy, 1980; Lowe and Goyder, 1983; Davies, 1985; Wilson, 1984 and Warren, 1990). Indeed, the most comprehensive study of environmental pressure groups and the media to date, was conducted by Lowe and Goyder in the late 1970s. The authors surveyed seventy-seven national voluntary groups, involved with the environment, between 1979 and 1980. Senior members of these groups were interviewed about a number of issues including: access to the media; membership; internal democracy; staff; relationships with government departments and co-operation between different environmental organisations. For details of the present structure of Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, The National Trust and the National Society for Clean Air see Table 11 (overleaf).

**Table 11**

- A**
- (i) **Name:** Friends of the Earth (FoE).
  - (ii) **Status:** FOE Ltd - registered company and FOE Trust - registered charity.
  - (iii) **Date established in UK:** FOE UK - 1971 and FOE Trust - 1984.
  - (iv) **Campaigns:** FOE runs six main campaigns: air pollution; countryside; cities for people; energy; toxic waste and tropical rainforests.
  - (v) **Annual Income (£000s):** 2,902 (1989)
  - (vi) **Funding:** main source of income from supporters contributions. Also receives funds from grants, special appeals, donations and sponsorships and events.
  - (vii) **Staff, national HQ:** 48

*Source : FOE annual report and accounts 1987-1988; Elkington et al. (eds) (1988); McCormick (1991).*

- B**
- (i) **Name:** Greenpeace.
  - (ii) **Status:** Greenpeace Ltd - registered company and Greenpeace Environmental Trust - registered charity.
  - (iii) **Date established in UK:** 1977
  - (iv) **Campaigns:** The four main campaign areas are: air pollution; wildlife; nuclear and toxic pollution.
  - (v) **Annual Income (£000s):** 4,500 (1989)
  - (vi) **Funding:** Receives most of its funding from membership subscriptions. Also financed by fundraising initiatives and from the sale of Greenpeace merchandise.
  - (vii) **Staff, national HQ:** 40 (1988)

*Source: Survey by Hill and Knowlton, (1988); Greenpeace literature; Elkington et al. (eds) (1988); McCormick, (1991).*

- C**
- (i) **Name :** The National Trust.
  - (ii) **Status :** registered charity.
  - (iii) **Date established in UK:** 1895
  - (iv) **Activities/Aims:** seeks to protect the countryside and ancient buildings in Britain.
  - (v) **Annual Income (£000s):** 55,800 (1989)
  - (vi) **Funding:** Government funding and membership subscriptions.
  - (vii) **Staff, national HQ:** approx. 140

*Source: Information supplied by the National Trust; McCormick (1991).*

- D)**
- (i) **Name:** The National Society for Clean Air (NSCA).
  - (ii) **Status:** registered charity.
  - (iii) **Date established in UK:** 1899
  - (iv) **Activities/Aims:** Primarily concerned with air pollution issues but also deal with noise, energy policy, waste disposal and transport.
  - (v) **Annual Income (£000s):** approx. 286 (1990)
  - (vi) **Funding:** Heavily funded by industry and also receives a grant from the Department of the Environment.
  - (vii) **Staff, national HQ:** 8

*Source: information supplied by NSCA.*

Since the 1960s there has been a significant increase in organised lobbying with the emergence of several single-issue pressure groups such as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), Shelter, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. Indeed, the evolution of the environmental lobby must be located in the wider context of the movement towards increased professionalism and political activism among pressure groups in general. In contrast to traditional environmental organisations such as the National Trust, the new environmental pressure groups of the 1970s actively sought to use the media to influence public opinion and parliament. Gradually they began to take on a more pro-active approach. As Des Wilson observes:

"... [these] were seen to be pioneering fresh approaches, in particular by combining detailed negotiation with Whitehall and Westminster with exploitation of the media to force politicians and civil servants to take them seriously." (1984:16)

Groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth performed stunts to attract media attention. For example, members of Friends of the Earth dressed up as aerosol cans to draw attention to the dangers of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) destroying the ozone layer. These stunts fitted in with the news values of journalists because they were novel and dramatic. One of the most successful groups in terms of the amount of quality media attention that it attracted was Greenpeace. As Porritt and Winner have observed:

"The Greenpeace 'media machine' has made it the best known environmental organisation in the world and they have alerted millions of people to a whole series of environmental issues through imaginative and courageous direct actions and high profile campaigning." (1988:26)

Friends of the Earth adopted a similar type of approach, although it was much lower profile and more emphasis was placed on constructing a public image based on carrying out their own authoritative research (Greenberg, 1985). Jan McHarry, senior information officer at Friends of the Earth, maintained:

"...certainly in the seventies we were, maybe, seen as a pressure group on the fringes. Always very active and the press always wanted to know our reaction, our comments. But it was very much a passive waiting for them to come to us apart from us doing stunts and dressing up and things like that to actually attract the press." (17th July 1989, p.1)

Friends of the Earth have built up a distinct image based upon research and lobbying activities reflected in the interviews with both print and television journalists. As Greenberg has suggested:

"What makes FoE so unique is that the organisation combines a strong research commitment with its attention-getting tactics. The decision to combine research and media events was made when the organisation was founded because it was felt that in order to have credibility and sustain its influence, independent of the publicity it generated, FoE had to show that the issues had been seriously thought through and that viable intelligent options to prevailing policies were available." (1985:356)

Indeed, Jan McHarry, senior information officer at Friends of the Earth, maintained:

"I mean Greenpeace's tactics are different. They're a lot more high profile, confrontational... and a lot more sort of direct action approach... But Friends of the Earth's approach is actually based on doing a lot of research and having a lot of answers before we launch campaigns. We're doing a lot of lobbying within the corridors of Whitehall and for our research and we're actually praised by quite a lot of select committees for that. So that's where our strength lies in a professional well argued case." (17th July 1989, p.9)

Although Greenpeace's reputation is based much more upon providing simple, immediate visual images of environmental destruction they have also sought to create an authoritative image in recent years (cf. Draper, 1987). Greenpeace employ their own research fellow, Dr Paul Johnston, at the scientific unit, Queen Mary College, who frequently appears on television documentaries about environmental matters. However, as Rob Edwards suggests, there is a major conflict within the organisation between those activists who favour

direct action and those who place more emphasis upon building a strong foundation based on education and scientific research:

"The irony is that over the last few years Greenpeace has been making genuine efforts to beef up its scientific credibility. It has devoted more resources to research, to report-writing and to conventional lobbying techniques. It has also sharpened up its advertising and begun direct mail shots. These changes have in turn annoyed some of the direct action traditionalists, who fear loss of purity and effectiveness." (1988:18)

Indeed, many of the radical environmental groups which were formed during the 1970s have become more conservative and less confrontational over the last decade. As McCormick suggests:

"While the traditional groups have tended to become more politically influential, the more activist groups of the early 1980s have, if anything, become more conservative, and more centrally a part of the 'establishment' environmental lobby. In 1980, for instance, Greenpeace was very much on the periphery of the lobby. While it had good contacts with other groups, its methods were unique: a reliance on confrontation and the staging of events geared towards catching media headlines... Since then it has not only seen a remarkable growth in its size, support and wealth, but it has also become less confrontational, and more inclined to use the same tactics of lobbying and discreet political influence once reserved by the more conservative groups." (1991:157-158)

In the past few years Greenpeace have worked to create a credible public image based upon sound scientific research. Press officer, Lucy Thorp explained:

"... one of the tactics that we employ in our campaigning is direct action. I mean that's why a lot of people think we're set apart... from other environmental organisations. So that's clearly one of the major images, so to speak. But one of the things that we've been trying to do is to back all our arguments strongly so we now have a Science Unit who work referencing all the material that we send out to the media so that it's all got a scientific basis and reference." (22nd Jan 1991, pp. 3-4)

During the past decade there have been important changes in relationships between news sources and journalists. Once on the margins of debate, environmental groups have become an established news source. Also, the power of the farming lobby has weakened, although it still wields considerable power. This partly reflects the trend for people to move

from urban areas to rural locales in the latter half of the 1980s, the increasing public support for conservation groups which have highlighted the way in which the British countryside is changing, and a crisis in confidence in the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF) resulting from a spate of consumer scares in the late 1980s (cf. McCormick, 1991). Indeed, Hall et al.'s (1978) theory of 'primary definers' fails to take account of shifts in the structure of access to the media (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). The ease with which sources secure access to the media shifts over time; to some extent this reflects media strategies but also external factors, such as the climate of political debate and public opinion.

The approaches adopted towards the media by the new environmental pressure groups of the late sixties and early seventies encouraged older organisations like the National Trust to rethink their own stance towards the media, to a certain extent. For example, whilst in 1990, the jubilee year of the 'Enterprise Neptune' appeal to save Britain's coastline, Emma-Louise O'Reilly, press officer for the National Trust, claimed: "...there's going to be a big drive to sort of try and raise a lot of money", in 1966 the first director of the appeal was sacked because he adopted a high profile public relations approach towards raising funds (cf. Lowe and Goyder, 1983). However, a major problem faced by environmental pressure groups in the 1990s is that the novelty and the impact of their old approaches has been superseded. Indeed Nick Gallie, Greenpeace's publicity director, admits that the media are not so receptive to their public relations activities as they once were:

"Greenpeace has always been inherently fascinating and newsworthy as far as the media are concerned. It presented them with a totally pre-packaged, simplistic but very powerful images of confrontation that were very new and exciting. T.V. journalists saw it as fascinating and bizarre that people were willing to stand in front of whaling harpoons or under a barrel of waste being dumped at sea. These activities were seen as heroic and were an absolute gift for the media. They were packaged in such a way that the media-newspapers as well as TV- could swallow them without having to chew. We still use these techniques now, but the novelty has worn off." (cited in Porritt and Winner, 1988:94)

One example of how stunts may no longer automatically attract media attention was provided by Philip Glover, tropical rainforests campaigner at Bristol Friends of the Earth. He related how Jonathan Porritt came down from Friends of the Earth's headquarters for a



media stunt but at the last minute the TV crews went off to film someone jumping off a building because it made better copy!

**ii) The Changing Agenda of the 1990s**

Mrs Thatcher's speeches to the Royal Society and to the Conservative Party Conference were welcomed by environmental pressure groups as a sign that environmental issues had at last been firmly placed in the political agenda. Stan Crush, press officer at Greenpeace, argued that the environmental agenda was inevitable and that it had only been a matter of time before the Government was forced to respond. Jan McHarry, senior information officer at Friends of the Earth, suggested that increasing scientific evidence about the deterioration of the environment forced Mrs Thatcher to pay attention to what her advisors were telling her:

"... I think some of the implications of the greenhouse effect, what might actually happen to this country, and indeed the world if the greenhouse effect does take hold, in terms of rising sea levels and things like that, the devastation of agricultural crops and things, actually meant she had to start listening to some of her advisors." (25th July 1989, p.5)

All of the representatives of environmental organisations who were questioned claimed that the activity of social movements was a major catalyst. A typical comment was that of Neil Verlander, information officer at Friends of the Earth:

"We launched a campaign on aerosols... and that took off quite well and people were starting to take notice of that... although we'd been saying for a long time things like the greenhouse effect were going to happen, the ozone layer problem... a lot of people have been dismissing it as scaremongering. But then you had a lot of government sponsored influential reports coming out which were actually saying the same things as we were saying. You know, they were finding there's a hole in the Antarctic, the earth was warming noticeably and so they were backing up and giving credibility to what we'd been saying for a very long time." (22nd June 1989, p.4)

Also the fact that many environmental groups engaged in more active recruitment drives explains, in part, the unprecedented increase in the numbers of people joining environmental groups in the mid 1980s (cf. McCormick, 1991).

### **iii) Media Access after Thatcher's Speech**

After Mrs Thatcher's speech caused environmental issues to rise on the political agenda, campaigning pressure groups witnessed a dramatic change in media receptiveness. As well as increased interest from the quality press and television many tabloid newspapers and womens' magazines approached environmental organisations such as Friends of the Earth. Indeed Jan McHarry suggested that womens' magazines played a major role in increasing general consumer awareness concerning environmental problems:

"The womens' press, and that's the womens' press in the wider sense, from the sort of general lifestyle magazines right through to the feminist magazines, were one of the sort of front runners in taking up environmental issues and the whole ozone debate really brought it home to peoples' attention. And that was really because the lifestyle magazines were running articles on the hole in the ozone layer. And now what you find is it is very difficult to open them up and find, you know, nothing connected with the environment." (17th July 1989, p.3)

Burgess (work in progress) also found supporting evidence through interviews with press officers from the Nature Conservancy Council and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. According to Jan McHarry the popular press prefer green consumerism stories which tend to centre on how the individual is affected by environmental threats. The first time Friends of the Earth received a mention in The Sun was in a story headlined "CHARLES PUTS BAN ON DI'S HAIRSPRAY" in February 1988. Indeed, Jan McHarry claimed:

"... perhaps more on issues such as green consumerism, consumer type issues, we're a lot more forthcoming on those issues to the tabloids. They don't really want to know about the economics of nuclear power, or something like that, but you know how the environment affects the products you buy and things like that." (17th July 1989, pp.4-5)

At the height of media interest in the environment, during the late 1980s, a whole variety of journalists, from Consumer Affairs correspondents to fashion editors, were latching on to green stories. Jan McHarry claimed: "You get the sense that there's a lot of fishing around to see how stories will link in with the environment." (17th July 1989, p.3) Some of the interviewees mentioned that a major problem they experienced during this

period was the media expected them to keep on supplying them with novel slants. Jan McHarry maintained:

"One particular difficulty now is that a lot of the press are coming through to us and saying we'd like to do a story on such and such can you give a new angle or something like this? And the new angles are getting very few and far between now." (17th July 1989,p.3)

However, Friends of the Earth viewed the increased media interest, particularly from the tabloid press, with a certain amount of scepticism. For example, Mike Birkin, a campaigner at Bristol Friends of the Earth , was very critical of an article that appeared in The Bristol Evening Post under the headline "West's tide of pollution", on January 4th 1989:

"There seem to be various, one or two, quotes that they seem to have made up. And something about eels, pesticides in eels, which actually came out in October and this thing about some sea birds being washed up in the Channel coast which is really nothing to do with the Severn estuary but they somehow made it, tried to pull it altogether into the one story so that wildlife faces tide of pollution. Ah it's very difficult to know how to deal with this sort of thing because you know for all these years we've been trying to get environmental stories in papers and now suddenly they're appearing anywhere and they're actually not very good, some of them..." (5th Jan. 1989, p.2)

Similarly, Greenpeace view environmental coverage in the popular press as often sensationalist. Sue Adams, press officer at Greenpeace, has maintained: "Until their coverage improves, my alternative is to run campaigns in regional and local papers where the readership is across the social strata." (Warren, 1990:79). More recently press officer, Lucy Thorp, suggested Greenpeace has a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the tabloid press:

"I mean we know that the tabloid press... well for instance, The Express, we know that their Editor loves whales so we know that... whale problems will probably get quite a bit of coverage... we don't effectively add on any different strategy when we're working with them but we... know the sort of areas that they prefer to write on and I mean we realise what the pros and cons of that are. So ah we tend to get more feature articles on the more sort of cuddly issues in that press. But then... The Daily Star, for instance, had a whole campaign on the transportation of spent fuel..." (22nd Jan. 1991, pp.5-6)

The dramatic increase in attention from the popular press was not witnessed by interest groups more narrowly focussed upon preserving Britain's countryside such as the

National Trust. Indeed, Emma-Louise O'Reilly, Press Officer for the Trust, suggested that there might have been an actual decline in the number of enquiries made by Environment Correspondents to the Trust since they are tending to go to the environmental pressure groups for story ideas. Indeed, Emma-Louise O'Reilly maintained that the National Trust press office received a huge amount of enquiries for general information on environmental matters which they could not provide:

"What I've noticed very much over the past few months is that there are a lot of regional newspapers who ring, who write in saying they've decided to do a green column so please can they have any information that would be useful for that. And the sort of increase in demands for environmental information without being specific is enormous. It's sometimes hard to know exactly what they want. Ah and sometimes they're disappointed because they think they're going to get all sorts of stories about campaigns and pressure groups and that sort of thing which they don't, wouldn't, get from us." (13th Dec. 1989, p.3)

Some environmental groups have responded to the increased awareness about environmental issues through broadening the scope of their activities. For example, in 1989 the National Society for Clean Air became the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection. Once primarily concerned with the quality of air, the society now embraces wider issues such as waste management, energy issues and noise pollution. The society's 'Annual Report for 1989-1990', noted:

"Once again the Society's Information Department has seen an increase in demand for services, with inquiries (some 10,000) rising by 30 per cent in comparison with the previous year. Educational queries still make up the bulk of the workload, but an increasing proportion come from industry, environmental health departments and the media... Once again NSCA has been busy briefing journalists on environmental issues and promoting Society policy through press releases and reports. The views of the Society have been sought on a wide range of issues, and we have been regularly and widely quoted in the press and on radio and television." (1990:14-15)

The interviews with environmental groups and Department of the Environment press officers suggest that, at the time of writing, they do not have as much ease of access to the media. As a result of deciding not to replace their Environment Correspondents in the last year, relations between some tabloid newspapers and the Department of the Environment have suffered, as have their relations with environmental organisations. Relations between sources and journalists are based upon trust and specialist correspondents, through being in

continuous contact with their sources, are much better placed to establish a relationship based upon mutual trust. Thus, the decision to appoint a specialist Environment Correspondent is of great significance in terms of generating more environmental news. For example, Department of the Environment press officer (1) claimed:

"... a lot of them, the tabloids, haven't got environment journalists anymore so we don't get calls from them. It's much easier if you're speaking to the same person all the time to build up a kind of regular relationship with them, and trust, because a lot of it's based upon trust. Because someone may phone you up and say what's happening next week, give me a feeling about when this big event is going to happen and if you know you can trust them you might say to them... this is what we reckon will happen and we know it isn't going to go down in print." (28th May 1991, p.7)

Also, Department of the Environment press officers advise ministers as to how trustworthy they think particular journalists are. Press Officer (1) explained:

"... ministers will ask us whether we can trust journalists and what we think about certain journalists. Are they intelligent? Are they really going to grill them?... Are they going to give them an easy time?... if you wanted to place an article you'd look at the actual particular journalist and what kind of a working relationship you have with him." (28th May 1991, p. 10)

#### **iv) The Organisation of Media Relations by Environmental Groups**

Environmental organisations cultivate their own media contacts for particular topics. However, the organisation of media relations varies greatly between groups. Greenpeace deal with the media largely through their centralised press office, whilst at Friends of the Earth it is the individual campaigner for each campaign area who develops close contacts with particular journalists. Often the campaigner targets certain individuals and refuses to speak to anyone else because this is viewed as the most effective way of dealing with the media. Many of the journalists interviewed mentioned the close relationship that Andrew Lees, water and toxics campaigner at Friends of the Earth, had developed with them. Friends of the Earth's central press office has less control over the information that is filtered through the media and is more concerned with long term information/education processes. As Chris Rose argues:

"Now Friends of the Earth are completely different in that they operate a sort of continual seepage or trickle system. They are quite happy to get coverage almost anywhere... They don't control their media in the same way as

Greenpeace does. With Greenpeace if Sue Adams says basically you shouldn't do it then it doesn't get done. At Friends of the Earth the last person to get an influence on the proceedings is say, Laura Thomas, who is the nearest you can get to Sue's position... so although in the public perception the two things are similar and often confused they're utterly different in the way that they use the media." (24th Jan. 1990, pp. 6-7)

The National Trust, like Greenpeace, operate through a central press office with most of the media contacts being made by the press and public relations manager and the press officers, but the emphasis is very much on the regions where there are sixteen local press officers. Unlike the press officers representing environmental pressure groups, Emma-Louise O'Reilly has contact with a very wide number of journalists in different fields from Gardening Correspondents to Education Correspondents, but does not have regular, close contact with Environment Correspondents. Table 12 indicates the main press contacts for each of the environmental organisations concerned.

<b>Table 12</b>	
<b><u>Key Press Contacts for Environmental Organisations</u></b>	
<b><u>Organisation</u></b>	<b><u>Key press contacts</u></b>
FoE	<u>The Observer, The Guardian, The Independent, The Times</u>
Greenpeace	<u>The Guardian, The Observer, The Times</u>
NSCA	<u>The Guardian, The Independent</u>
National Trust	<u>The Independent, The Daily Telegraph, The Financial Times, The Times</u>

Not suprisingly the Department of the Environment tends to have most contact with quality, establishment, newspapers. Indeed, press officer (1) at the Department of the Environment maintained:

"Our contact is with the quality newspapers and The Daily Express. And The Daily Mail used to be but they haven't got an Environment Correspondent... We work with them all, there's no doubt about that... if there's a story to tell we would invite them all in. Ah, if we have to pick and choose, I think one has to be honest, we would tend to go to The Times or The Telegraph or The Financial Times, depending upon what implications the story has..." (28th May 1991, pp.7-8)

During the 1980s most of the larger environmental groups established press offices and they have undergone considerable expansion, particularly over the last three years (see Table 13). As McCormick notes:

"Another clear change in tactics during the 1980s involved environmental groups paying more attention to public attitudes and behaviour... Thanks partly to media activities during the 1970s and early 1980s, partly to Mrs Thatcher's statements on environmental issues from 1988 and partly to the globalisation of the environment, the media in Britain (as elsewhere in the West) responded by giving new prominence to environmental issues. Most larger groups have full-time press and public relations departments, most of which grew in size during the Thatcher years." (1991:161)

<b><u>Dates When Press Offices Established</u></b>		
<u>Organisation</u>	<u>Date when press office/ information dep. set up</u>	<u>No of f/t staff in 1989</u>
FoE	mid 1980s	4
Greenpeace	1987	5
National Trust	1981	4
NSCA	n.a.	1

At Greenpeace the number of full-time press officers has increased five-fold since 1987. Lucy Thorp, a press officer at Greenpeace, maintained:

"The department has changed from being one person to being five people... Two years ago probably what we would do with any information that we'd have is send out a news release. Well we realized that that wasn't the best way of targeting the media... We're actually targeting specific media, depending upon what the story is." (22nd Jan. 1991, pp.2-3)

The Department of the Environment press office has also expanded in recent years. Press officer (2) claimed:

"...press officers have really, really expanded all over Whitehall. I mean, you know, it wasn't that long ago that the Department of Health press office and here was just only a few people. And I think, you know, with the realisation of how important media, mass media, are as a form of communication... I think probably the work of the press office and their advice has become more highly valued..." (28th May 1991, p.3)

The Department of the Environment's national press office currently employs fifteen press officers, five of whom specifically deal with environmental issues. In addition, there are normally two press officers in each of the nine regional offices. The national press office sends out about two hundred press releases about environmental matters a week on average. In comparison, Friends of the Earth send out about six press releases a week.

**v) Competition and Co-operation Between Environmental Organisations**

Few researchers have analysed the extent to which pressure groups compete or co-operate with one another, and the relationship between voluntary and statutory bodies. However, some evidence suggests that in recent years there has been a general movement towards greater co-ordination among voluntary groups in a number of fields (see for example, Tumber 1988). Indeed, with the growing professionalism of environmental groups there has been a corresponding strengthening of ties between environmental organisations, mainly on an ad hoc level. Lowe and Goyder (1983) found that a third of the environmentalists included in their survey had been previously employed by another environmental group. A small core of groups, including Friends of the Earth, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, The National Trust and the Civic Trust, had contact with the bulk of organisations in this field. Indeed, half of the groups in Lowe and Goyder's survey had contacts with fourteen or more environmental organisations. They found that the nature of the competition between groups differed as to the nature of the groups' contacts. Whilst there was competition for limited resources between groups who enjoyed a few contacts with groups of similar interests, competition among groups who had a lot of contact with organisations with similar interests was mainly over what objectives they should pursue.

Since the mid 1960s coalitions such as the Council for Environmental Conservation have been established to co-ordinate the environmental movement as a whole. The Council was set up in 1969 and represented a number of groups including: the National Trust, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Council for Nature and the Civic Trust. The formation of such coalitions reflects the growing realisation that it is important to present a unified body to the government and the media (Lowe and Goyder, 1983). However, by the mid 1980s the Council for Environmental Conservation had virtually ceased to exist due to



internal difficulties and to disagreements within the environmental lobby. Under its new title, the Environment Council, it is now mainly concerned with providing information and political contacts for smaller environmental groups.

Some of the groups in Lowe and Goyder's survey questioned the effectiveness of such coalitions, pointing out that the groups tend to work independently of one another and that consequently they lack the resources necessary for joint initiatives. Whilst Friends of the Earth keeps its distance from such bodies, according to Jonathan Porritt they are 'mere talking shops', a number of environmental groups think that more formal efforts should be made to unite the movement. For instance, the chairman of the Green Alliance suggested the failure of formal efforts of co-ordination has meant that the movement lacks 'real political bite' (cf. Lowe and Goyder, 1983). Indeed Neil Verlander, information officer at Friends of the Earth, highlighted the need for the environmental movement to be seen as a united force: "I mean obviously the danger is now that people are going to try and divide and rule by trying to show up the difference between us and Greenpeace and Ark and we have to be careful that's not going to happen" (22nd June 1989). Indeed, environmental groups are in a double bind because they have to maintain their own separate identity in order to attract new members, upon which they depend for financial support, but they also need to convey a common cause and present a unified front. The former director of Friends of the Earth, Jonathan Porritt, recognises the need for greater strategic co-ordination (cf. McCormick, 1991).

More recently, the Green Alliance was formed in 1978 with the objective of co-ordinating a political strategy for the environmental movement as a whole. Tom Burke, director of the Green Alliance, explained:

"We want to help groups distinguish between the political process (what many people do at many levels) and the governmental process (what a small number of people do). If you want to change the agenda you have to understand politics." (Quoted in McCormick 1991:38)

Umbrella groups which have been set up for a multitude of purposes have generally been less successful than coalitions that have been formed for specific reasons. For instance,

The Advisory Committee on Oil Pollution at Sea, set up in 1952, has been successful in getting a lot of groups involved in campaigning about this issue. Members of the committee included: the Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Fauna Preservation Society, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, together with shipping interests, local authorities and the port and harbour authorities. Also Transport 2000, a coalition of environmental groups, amenity societies, the three main railway unions and parts of the railway industry, has enjoyed considerable success (Brookes and Richardson, 1975).

On occasions links with other environmental organisations, which have a higher media profile, can prove very beneficial. Also, through joint action with quasi-governmental environmental groups more radical organisations can enhance their social credibility. For example, Mike Birkin related how local contacts with the Civic Trust, a mainstream, apolitical organisation, ensured sympathetic newspaper coverage of Friends of the Earth's 'Cities for People' project in Bristol:

"... that was launched between ourselves and the Bristol Civic Society, which is quite a sort of establishment body and we managed then, our Civic Society colleagues managed to go along and have an interview, a talk, with the Editor of The Evening Post beforehand and we got sort of an editorial and a centre page on the evening that we had the meeting that launched it. So we did, we have on occasion, managed to get this sort of very sympathetic coverage in the media, but I think again that wasn't really Friends of the Earth that did it, it was the Civic Society who are better connected, a more establishment body." (5th Jan. 1989, p.5)

Cross membership is a feature of many of the older environmental groups. For example, in 1981 Lord Craigton was Vice-President of the World Wildlife Fund (UK); chairman of the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society; chairman of the Council for Environmental Conservation; chairman of an all party conservation committee; a member of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers; a member of the Environmental Committee of the Royal Society of Arts and chairman of the Zoo Federation of Great Britain (Lowe and Goyder, 1983).

One way in which environmental groups try to avoid overlap is by compiling a media diary. In recent years an Environmental Press Officers group has regularly met to discuss

their work and David Streeve of the Conservation Foundation has put together a diary of media events so that major publicity activities do not coincide. Emma-Louise O'Reilly explained:

"... it could be that we're trying to get the Environment Correspondent of the same paper to two different events at different ends of the country... what happens is that we tell him two or three months ahead and he compiles a diary. We all know when he sends it to us, the compilation, and we can go to each others things or we know not to try and go headlong on the same day." (13th Dec. 1989, p. 17)

Although environmental groups would generally deny that they are in competition with one another for media space, as Chris Rose maintained: "... they're competing but they do co-operate to the extent of trying to avoid each other's dates." (24th Jan. 1990)

During the past decade there has also been a movement towards greater co-operation between voluntary groups and quasi-official bodies. Whilst at the beginning of the decade many environmental groups openly criticised bodies such as the Nature Conservancy Council, they were supportive of government agencies in 1989 when the government announced plans to the disband the Countryside Commission and the Nature Conservancy Council (cf. McCormick, 1991).

Also relations between the environmental lobby and the Department of the Environment have improved in recent years particularly since the former Secretary for the Environment, Nicholas Ridley, who many environmentalists viewed with contempt, was replaced. As McCormick suggests:

"The relationship between environmental groups and departments has improved markedly in recent years, mainly as a result of the relative decline of influence of economic interest groups, the growing prominence of the environment as a policy issue, and strengthened environmental regulation arising from changes in the structure of government." (1991:40)

Indeed, the former director of the Green Alliance, Tom Burke, worked within the Department of the Environment as advisor to the former Minister for the Environment,

Michael Heseltine. As Department of the Environment Press officer (2) observed: "...it's all part of the growing constructive dialogue which is developing, which is something we promised would happen in the White Paper." (28th May 1991, p.12)

Co-ordination within the environmental lobby and relations between statutory and voluntary bodies, then, have generally improved since the early 1980s. However, there is still a great deal of competition between groups, not only to capture new members, but to influence policy-makers.

**vi) Which Media do Environmental Groups Use Most?**

Previous research indicates that environmental organisations view national quality newspapers as the best vehicle for influencing public opinion and government policy. Lowe and Goyder (1983) found that the majority of the seventy-seven environmental groups surveyed made the most use of the national quality press. The authors found that fifty-nine percent of the groups claimed to have received television coverage, seventy-four percent had received radio coverage and only nine percent said that they had had no media coverage at all.

The interviews with representatives of environmental groups would seem to confirm this. All of the organisations, with the exception of Greenpeace, claimed that the national press was the most important medium. For example Jan McHarry, senior information officer at Friends of the Earth, maintained that it is much easier, less time consuming and more reliable to wire out a press release than it is to try and gain direct television or radio coverage:

"It's very easy to write a press release, fax it out and get it on all the press agencies and the wires and get that right round the world. Obviously we're using electronic mail systems such as Greenmail, which are important as well. Radio and TV you're a lot more at the mercy of producers' schedules. You can find yourself waiting around for a long time. You can find that you go in and do an interview and it gets pulled out at the last minute. I mean obviously that happens with stories for newspapers, but not to such a great extent... you're just able to reach national regional media without having to travel the length and breadth of the country to do interviews. That's not to say, you know, I mean we need to use TV and radio as well but TV often the reponse time is a

lot longer or you can spend all day out filming for a thirty seconds clip."  
(17th July 1989, pp.8-9)

Research indicates that non-governmental organisations in the crime, law and justice field also view relationships with broadcast journalists as frequently unreliable (Tumber, 1988). Journalists working in television are often on short term contracts or they are seeking to move up the career ladder so it is often more difficult to establish long term relationships with them than it is with print journalists. When questioned about which media the National Trust use most, Emma-Louise O'Reilly responded:

"I think nationally probably the papers, for the simple reason that they've got more space than national television or radio news. And regionally I think a combination of all three. I think they're probably pretty evenly spread in the regions... I mean the news stories do go equally to all the media and I would pay equal attention to them all but I find that I talk to the people in the newspapers more because they tend to be specialist correspondents who have more space whereas with television programmes you're just talking to a researcher who's just tackling it for the first time and tomorrow he or she could be doing something completely different." (13th Dec. 1989, p.14)

Indeed quality newspapers are crucial for reaching target audiences and an important channel for influencing politicians. Moreover environmental organisations have recognised that if they obtain national press coverage it is likely to be followed up in television or radio reports. As Chris Rose suggests:

"... the real importance of getting stuff into newspapers is to influence politicians because they have people who actually cut them up. And if you want to get a subject on television there's no point going to talk to TV researchers and people like that because television is an extremely mobile world... The best way to influence television content wise is to get something in a national newspaper because they all start off every morning... and they're presented with the cuttings from the newspapers and they then proceed to ring up the conservation groups. That's how they do their research basically. They'd deny it but that's what they actually do!" (24th Jan. 1990, p.11)

Sources generally have less frequent contact with journalists working for Sunday newspapers than with the daily papers. For example, Press Officer (1) at the Department of the Environment claimed:

"... working with journalists who work on a Sunday newspaper is very different from a daily because when they phone you up the kind of questions you get are far more detailed, the kind of information they want, because they're probably going to want to do a feature on it because that's the nature of the Sunday newspaper. So though... you speak to them once or twice a week about the same subject you know they're going to do a big piece on it. Whereas, you know, we may speak to Mike McCarthy and people like that several times a day about different things." (28th May, 1991, pp.7-8)

Greenpeace's media strategy is much more narrowly focussed than that of many environmental organisations. They gear themselves particularly to television news and to newspaper visuals, employing their own cameraman and photographer. As Chris Rose maintains:

"What Greenpeace are very good at is they've invented, if you like, a sort of morality play... that takes Greenpeace straight out of the editorial system of gatekeepers... It puts them into that sort of tabloid news and that's what headline news in television is about because it has to be thirty seconds subjects, thirty seconds visuals. And that's what Greenpeace provides so that anything that Greenpeace feel they can actually influence constructively like that, they can campaign on. If you can't deal with it in those terms, and their formula, they can't really campaign on it... So I mean they're using the media in that way, deliberately restricting most of their input using that one visible bit that you can see using television news basically and newspaper photographs." (24th Jan. 1990, pp.5-6)

Press officer (1) at the Department of the Environment complained that they tend to experience more difficulty obtaining coverage on national television news than on regional news:

"... it's much more difficult for us to get things on the national news than anything else... there's less news in the BBC... they have to stick to a certain amount of stories, they've got a certain amount of time and so even with something you think may be on the news it can easily get pushed down the order list by just another story happening after it so there's no guaranteed way... regional news is very different because if you've got a minister in the area and he's launching something you can make it very much a regional news issue by hanging it, you know, on one of the local pegs as it were." (28th May 1991, p.13-14)

Given the increased media interest in environmental affairs environmental groups need to rethink some of their strategies towards the media. Considerable opportunity for further exposure exists, for example, within radio. Chris Rose, director of Media Natura, argues:

"I think they ought to aim it more at radio because radio is cheap and they could actually get on radio a lot more. Ah people listen to the radio when they're using it as a sort of recreation while they're doing something else so they actually do listen to the radio and they remember things much more on the radio, sometimes, than they do on television. Television is such an uphill battle. Television is very ghettoised in that people will switch on to a particular programme so you're reaching your members if you get onto 'Nature' or something like that. And I think they ought to spend a lot more time working on things like womens' magazines which have a much longer life. If you get an article in a womens' magazine it might have a readership of twenty people because it might end up in a doctor's surgery, for example." (24th Jan. 1990, pp.10-11)

Indeed some of the larger more well financed groups, such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, have begun to explore some of these possibilities. Jan McHarry claimed that part of the public relations strategy at Friends of the Earth includes making more use of television and radio, together with writing articles for magazines:

"What we're doing is looking at getting a lot more articles placed in magazines as well. We get asked to provide a lot of information on our campaigns, what we're doing, how the environment is important. We supply the information, we often end up having to check it so there's no reason why we can't write the stuff in the first place and that's something we are looking to do a lot more." (17th Jan. 1990, p.8)

Similarly, Greenpeace are looking at ways of stimulating interest through feature articles. Press officer, Lucy Thorp, explained:

"We also have a features writer who works to much longer deadlines and targets specifically womens' magazines... as well as actually going out and offering feature ideas or new angles on stories... if there was a story which we think would work well as a feature and people aren't covering it she might possibly ring different people up with that idea." (22nd Jan. 1991, p.1)

When questioned as to why Greenpeace decided to target womens' magazines, Lucy Thorp responded:

"Because it was an area with longer lead in times... women seem to be very interested in conservation and environmental issues and ah womens' magazines are crying out for articles and features." (22nd Jan. 1991, p.20)

Some of the smaller environmental groups still tend to be reactive, rather than actively cultivating long term contacts with journalists covering environmental affairs. As Chris Rose observes:

"... small groups, a lot of them... have got one or two staff and they know how to do simple things like write press releases... they understand , you know, about topicality and about hitting different triggers for local, regional, media... Ah but they're not, they're largely responsive and reactive and helping with local newspapers and national colour writers where people just fill the space that has been allocated as a result of editors deciding that so called green issues are more important than they used to be. They're not actually in a relationship with them." (24th Jan. 1990, p.7)

#### **vii) Monitoring the Media**

The increased professionalism of many environmental organisations is reflected in widespread monitoring of the media to assess the frequency and quality of coverage about themselves, in addition to media treatment of environmental issues in general. As in many other areas, such as non-governmental organisations concerned with crime, law and justice, there is very little monitoring of radio or television (cf. Tumber, 1988). Although the groups interviewed carried out their own systematic monitoring of the national quality press, television coverage was generally monitored on a very ad hoc basis. Indeed, monitoring of the media is closely tied to budgetary constraints with the National Trust, the wealthiest of the groups under consideration, carrying out the most extensive survey.

Friends of the Earth clip all the national daily newspapers with the exception of popular newspapers such as The Sun and News of the World. Similarly, Greenpeace and the National Trust monitor all the broadsheets and the tabloids except the above. In addition, Greenpeace make use of a press clippings service of the local press, reflecting the importance they place on regional media. The National Society for Clean Air are more selective in the



choice of newspapers they monitor. The society clips The Times, The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Independent, The Observer and The Sunday Times.

Television programmes are monitored on an informal level by members of staff at Friends of the Earth and the National Society for Clean Air, but no systematic analysis is carried out. Neil Verlander, information officer for Friends of the Earth, claimed: "... we're so busy we haven't got time to look at the stuff." (22nd June, 1989) Greenpeace have greater resources and are able to subscribe to a headline service for television and radio. Also, Greenpeace carry out some analysis of trends in media coverage. Press officer, Lucy Thorp, maintained:

"Sue, who's the media director, does an analysis of every month of all campaigns and how the initiatives have gone and in that she'll also say which were the major stories that month and other external stories, so we can look back and see how things have gone." (22nd Jan. 1991, p.17)

However, the National Trust was the only organisation to have an outside monitoring contract to video television programmes. Clearly, this reflects the fact that the Trust is a much wealthier organisation than Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, or the National Society for Clean Air, and can afford to devote a large amount of resources towards developing its media strategy.

Not surprisingly, by far the most sophisticated monitoring is carried out by government sources. The Department of the Environment press office subscribes to a press cuttings monitoring service for the national and regional press and the technical team automatically record all television and radio news broadcasts, and any interviews with members of the department. The video material is stored for a certain amount of time and then it is usually discarded. Press officers obviously have to keep up with current affairs and Radio Four's 'Today' programme is a central part of their culture. Press officer (2) claimed:

"Most press officers listen to the 'Today' programme... I mean I'm sure everyone does. Everyone says did you hear so and so on today's programme, weren't they awful or weren't they good... 'Today' programme is the one that Thatcher used to listen to as well but is listened to by all politicians and journalists and is seen by ministers, I think, as being, you know, apart from a national news slot as *the* say. It's always monitored." (28th May 1991, p.22)

**viii) News-Management and the Manipulation of the Agenda**

A further way in which environmental organisations have become more sophisticated is through actively manipulating the media. Hall et al. (1978) fail to consider instances where the influence of 'primary definers' is not clearly visible, such as 'off-the-record' briefings and news-management. Previous research has show that environmental groups use the media to their advantage in a number of ways. This may include the timing of the release of a report so that its details are covered by the media just before a government report on the same topic is released, or developing close contacts with particular journalists to whom one can go to if one wants to 'break' a story and sensitive investigative journalism (Wilson, 1984; Davies, 1985; Warren, 1990).

Indeed, the present study suggests that this less visible aspect of source power should not be overlooked. Lucy Thorp, a press officer at Greenpeace, suggested:

"We try not to do things on specific dates when we know there's going to be a lot of coverage, you know, budget day or whatever... we get this which is a profile, which is a sort of future news service. So we go through that and we pull out all the different things that are going to be of interest to us, all the different events in the year, so we know we can actually peg stories on those sorts of things." (22nd Jan. 1991, pp. 17-18)

Clearly, the Department of the Environment also manage the news to a considerable extent. The Times' Environment Correspondent, Michael McCarthy, claimed:

"... the press office at the Department of the Environment is specifically targeting me and my colleagues all the time and trying to get us to report the news in the way they want it reported, and so are ministers, all the time." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.21)

However, when a press officer at the Department of the Environment was questioned about the extent to which they manage the news, the charge that unfavourable material is strategically released at times when media are preoccupied with other news was denied. Press officer (1) maintained:

"...there always used to be this long running joke that, you know, you release bad news at kind of Three O'Clock on a Friday afternoon... just before a parliamentary recess so it goes unnoticed. But I think the journalists are far

too sharp. You couldn't get away with that and we really can't just, you know, slow things up and try and cover things over... I mean I just don't think we could, you know, I think it's absolutely impossible to time it like that, You know, to actually know there's going to be events around... other big news stories. I mean who can predict the news? (28th May, 1991, p.25)

One of the most famous pressure groups to have been successful in manipulating the media is the Campaign for Lead Free Air, led by Des Wilson. The organisation has used the media in a number of ways to sustain public interest and to force parliament to respond to its recommendations about the levels of lead contained in petrol. For example, a document which gave great medical support to the argument for lead free petrol, received just before the start of the campaign, was deliberately held back until the most opportune moment arose when it was leaked to The Times who ran an editorial calling for a ban on lead in petrol (cf. Wilson, 1984).

A more recent example of how environmental pressure groups have sought to influence the agenda is the 'Green Gauntlet', a set of environmental recommendations which have been drawn up by Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature. Jan McHarry, senior information officer at Friends of the Earth, explained:

"... last November we published something called the 'Green Gauntlet' which is thirty policy objectives which could be achieved in the government's lifetime, very practical policies. And in this November, November 1989, we'll actually be looking at those to see if existing loopholes and legislation have been tightened up and various other things. And if not then we'll know the rhetoric doesn't actually match the reality and it'll provide a very useful pointer because it's very easy to... say you're concerned with an environmental issue, but to actually get down there and begin to tackle it, it's a completely different thing." (17th July 1989, p.6)

Jan McHarry sees Friends of the Earth as performing a watchdog role, continually monitoring the Government's performance on the environmental front:

"... although we do it to quite a lot of an extent, there's a lot of behind the scenes lobbying, getting resolutions across, not only for the local party but for all parties. With the environment so high up the environmental spectrum at the moment the possibilities are now endless and this is now what we're actually looking at in terms of our campaigns as well. So we're never there setting the agenda but we're there close behind making sure that items that should be on

the agenda are on the agenda and the things that are not, you know, get put on there." (17th July, 1989, p.22)

Also Friends of the Earth have successfully secured media attention through more indirect approaches. For example, Jonathan Porritt helped Prince Charles to write his influential speech on the environment on the 6th of March 1989 which received wide media attention; it was carried on ITN's *10 O'Clock News* broadcast and extensively covered in the national press.

Friends of the Earth are developing a major public relations/media outreach strategy. They have taken on more staff in the Information Department to deal with media relations and they plan to undertake more outreach work, such as approaching television and radio stations more frequently. Additionally, Friends of the Earth propose to target the tabloid press together with citizens advice bureaus, women, the young and ethnic minorities. They also plan to produce their own exclusive photographs. Jan McHarry explained:

"... last year when we were invited to go to Nigeria, to Coco, the site being used for waste disposal, we were actually one of the few groups with photos so when we came back those photos were in tremendous demand so... that has given us a taster of where you can get an exclusive photo, how extensively you can market that photograph. But again it boils down to lack of staff resources here at the moment which is again something we're trying to tackle." (17th Jan. 1989, p.16)

Similarly Greenpeace are taking advantage of the recent cutbacks in broadcasting through supplying broadcast format footage to television networks. Press officer, Lucy Thorp claimed:

"... we're going to be doing more filming especially at the moment when we see the television companies have very little money and they're cutting back on their resources. If we can actually supply them with footage they're more likely to run our stories so we do make freely available all of our television footage." (22nd Jan. 1991, p.12)

Indeed Ian Breach, the BBC's Environment Correspondent, maintained:

".... increasingly we're taking pictures from Greenpeace or WWF who are supplying us with broadcast format footage. You know, they've now learnt

that if they shoot stuff on Betacam the broadcasting networks are increasingly happy to take it because it means that we don't have to spend the money." (24th Nov. 1990)

Greenpeace also has a Communications Division in London, which houses all their film and video footage, and an international press officer. The footage is made available to journalists for a small fee.

Also, Greenpeace are developing a research programme to assess trends in public attitudes towards the environment. Press officer, Lucy Thorp, explained: "... we've done a series of tracking public opinion polls which is an on-going, a completely on-going... market research programme." (22nd Jan. 1991, p.5)

Another way in which sources manipulate the agenda is through 'off-the-record' briefings. Press officers at the Department of the Environment spend a considerable amount of time providing such briefing for journalists. Press Officer (1) maintained:

"We also arrange press conferences and press briefings which are normally 'off-the-record' background briefings for journalists, perhaps on particular subjects which are a bit more complex..." (28th May 1991, p.2)

Press officers at the Department of the Environment advise and brief ministers about their media appearances and negotiate terms. Press Officer (1) suggested:

"... we'll advise ministers as to whether we think they should actually accept the bid of the interview or not. And if they accept it we make sure they're well briefed. You know, we agree the terms of the interview... for example we may say we only want to do it live, we won't do it pre-recorded, because of course if we pre-record then they can edit and intercut things so often things can be taken out of context. We may say we want the last word. We may say we only want to do a one to one interview or something like that, or we may say don't touch this with a barge pole." (28th May 1991, pp.1-2)

Although environmental pressure groups have more access to the media now the evidence suggests that they could develop a more focused strategy, targeting different sections of the public in different media. Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor at ITN, suggested:

"What I think they're not actually quite so good at is picking the turning points in environmental coverage and what people think of the environment and knowing how to manipulate those. Those are very hard to do and they've done it to a certain extent behind the scenes but not through the media, like Jonathan Porritt writing Prince Charles' speech, or talking to him about it, offering suggestions, whatever it was. Now that's as significant because I think that was as significant as Thatcher's speech and in a sense that's an indirect approach to the media because they all knew we'd cover it obviously. But in their direct approaches I think the ease of access they've now got to the media actually makes it more difficult for them to be discriminating." (17th Jan. 1989, p.24)

One possible strategy environmental groups could follow is to devote more of their resources towards improving their media relations. Although most environmental pressure groups have very limited resources and rely to a great extent upon membership subscriptions, long-term strategies towards the media could become more of a priority.

#### **ix) Resources**

The question of the financial position of environmental pressure groups raises the whole issue of the mobilisation of resources whether they be money, knowledge, skills or organisational factors. This aspect of the relationship between media and sources has surprisingly been neglected. However, successful relations between government and environmental groups depends to a large extent upon the amount of resources that they command and the degree to which their demands are seen as rational (McCarthy and Zald, 1976; Moodie and Studdert-Kennedy, 1970).

a) Income

<b>Table 14</b>			
<b><u>Sources of income for environmental groups</u></b>			
	<u>Number of groups ranking:</u>		
	<u>1st</u>	<u>2nd</u>	<u>3rd</u>
membership subscriptions	36	10	8
earnings	11	19	12
government grants	11	6	11
gifts or endowments	9	16	14
private trusts or foundations	6	9	9
investments	4	8	5
donations or sponsorships from private companies	4	5	4
(N = 73)			
<i>Source: Reproduced from Lowe and Goyder (1983:43)</i>			

Table 14 indicates that most environmental pressure groups rely on membership subscriptions as their most important source of income. Lowe and Goyder (1983) found that membership subscriptions were the most important source of funds for fifty percent of the environmental groups included in the survey. The annual income of the groups varied considerably, with a median annual income of around £55,000. The third highest ranked source of income was from government grants with twenty-three percent of groups describing themselves as very dependent upon financial aid from the government. The main source of this aid comes from the Department of the Environment, the Nature Conservancy Council, and the Countryside Commission. This is a relatively new development and is linked to recognition by the State that such groups can take some of the work load off the government and at the same time they are seen as being independent.

However, if the grant is large then it is likely that it is given on the condition that it is used for a particular purpose and the accounts are handled in a specific manner. In this way some groups, such as the Civic Trust, become what Lowe and Goyder term 'agents of government' and the government is able to maintain control over quangos such as the

Countryside Commission and the Nature Conservancy Council. Further, financial dependence upon the government or private trusts may lead groups to be uncritical of them for fear that their funding may be withdrawn (Lowe and Goyder, 1983).

Over the last decade most environmental groups have seen a dramatic increase in income (see Table 15). The National Trust is one of the wealthiest organisations but Greenpeace, the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Friends of the Earth have the largest increases in income between 1980 and 1989.

	1980	1985	1989	% change 1980-89
Greenpeace	175*	600	4,500	+ 2,470
BTCV	500	n.a.	9,000	+ 1,700
WWF	1,646	4,601	20,760	+ 1,160
FoE	200*	414	2,902	+ 1,360
Ramblers	147	n.a.	1,193	+ 710
CPRE	145	n.a.	755	+ 420
RSPB	2,724	6,976	13,268	+ 390
National Trust	24,560	37,328	55,800	+ 127
<b>Total</b>	<b>30,097</b>	<b>n.a.</b>	<b>108,178</b>	<b>+ 260</b>

Even though Greenpeace have witnessed a substantial increase in income, because of the cost of moving to a new headquarters, they have recently cut back in a number of areas. Press officer, Lucy Thorp explained:

"...we've had to put out quite a lot of outlay this year and pay back loans... we were asked to cut all our budgets and we have in fact cut, I think we've cut our budget by fifteen percent... but we did actually increase our filming project



because we've seen this gap where the TV companies have very little money so it's going to be good to supply them with some footage..." (22nd Jan. 1991, p.22)

Chris Rose claims many environmental groups are not putting enough resources into communicating with the media and targeting their message to non-members:

"... if there's one thing wrong with most of them it's that if you analyse their budgets you'll find that they're spending most of their information, most of their communications budget, is going on communicating with their members, which is totally useless. If you ask the members most of them will probably say that they get too much stuff... So they ought to be spending their money on communicating with people that they want to change and they've got far too much emphasis on bits of paper. I mean quite often they spend a lot of money on something like a leaflet or a report and it would have been far more sensible to actually employ somebody who's a good, personable talker, lobbyist..." (24th Jan. 1990, p.9)

Media Natura, a media charity set up in October 1988, seeks to help some of the smaller environmental organisations, with fewer resources, which are not so sophisticated in terms of media relations. The media projects cost about a quarter of the commercial price through a media sponsorship scheme whereby media personnel donate their services at reduced rates. However, the majority of projects have been carried out for well known groups such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the World Wide Fund for Nature and the London Wildlife Trust. Chris Rose explained:

"... it might be the small groups that need it most but they're not necessarily the people who ask for it. I mean they have to come to us...They come to us with an idea or sometimes the media people get the idea and we find the group. And then we get them to go through a process of identifying who it is they're trying to communicate with and what they're trying to communicate... what we spend a lot of time with doing them is getting them to work out how it's going to be distributed, who it's marketed at, whether or not it's actually the right message, what the message is supposed to achieve and, you know, when and where is it going to be got across." (24th Jan. 1990, pp.1-2)

There is also the difficulty of conflicting targets; do environmental groups target decision makers or new members through public relations? Indeed, there is a fundamental tension over reaching membership through the media, upon which they depend for funds, and influencing politicians through the media. Another problem is that environmental groups are

constrained in different ways; while some politically neutral groups, such as Friends of the Earth, cannot get involved in the some of the ways they want to, other groups, such as the National Trust, are tied to current government thinking and MPs sit on their boards.

***b) Staff***

Environmental groups with the largest number of staff were, in the main, established more than thirty years ago and tend to receive substantial government funding (Lowe and Goyder, 1983). For instance, in 1990 the World Wide Fund for Nature employed 195 staff, while in 1988 the Nature Conservancy Council employed 758 staff and the Countryside Commission 130 staff (cf. Hill and Knowlton, 1988). In contrast Greenpeace employed 80 staff in 1990 and Friends of the Earth employed 80 staff in 1989 (see Table 16). However, the National Society for Clean Air only employed 8 full-time members of staff in their headquarters, with only one responsible for media relations.

FOE	8 (1984)	80 (1989)	900% increase
BTCV	20 (1980)	150 (1989)	650% increase
Greenpeace	12 (1985)	80 (1990)	570% increase
WWF	50 (1980)	195 (1990)	290% increase
Ramblers	12 (1980)	28 (1989)	135% increase
National Trust	1,919 (1984)	2,383 (1988)	24% increase

*Source: reproduced from McCormick 1991:155*

Table 16 shows that Friends of the Earth, the British Trust for Conservation Vounteers and Greenpeace have experienced the greatest percentage increase in staff. There has also been a corresponding increase in the numbers of experienced staff responsible for lobbying and information services. Indeed, Greenpeace now employs one full-time lobbyist and in 1989 Friends of the Earth employed nineteen people with responsibility for campaigns and another eleven staff worked in the information department. Also, over half the groups

surveyed by Lowe and Goyder at the end of the 1970s stated that they had staff with journalistic or public relations skills. Increasingly, environmental groups are recruiting staff with journalistic backgrounds. For example, the features writer at Greenpeace formerly worked for 'Living Magazine' and 'Woman Magazine', while the photo librarian was photo editor for 'City Limits'.

Although there has been a marked increase in the number of publicity staff employed by environmental groups over the last decade the environmentalists frequently complain that they do not have the resources to deal with huge floods of inquiries. For example Jan McHarry, senior information officer at Friends of the Earth, claimed:

"Within the Information Department we've always had one information officer. Our other attempt to take on a second information officer turned it into a full-time publications post. So when you're looking at that level, looking at a temporary information assistant dealing with twenty four thousand written enquiries a year, the press inquiries outreach work and campaign support work, you're talking about a job which is under a great deal of stress..." (17th July 1989, p.17)

A frequent complaint of many of the environmental groups was that print journalists often expect them to act as unpaid researchers. Given the rise in media interest concerning environmental matters increasingly groups such as Friends of the Earth are not answering such enquiries. Jan McHarry claimed, "... we won't help them where it's very much a last minute try Friends of the Earth they might do work for you type approach, which is what a lot of the press are actually trying on at the moment to a lot of groups." (17th July 1989) The larger environmental groups have developed a sense of self-confidence as a source in relation to the media and increasingly they are restricting the information they provide, or charging for their services. As Young argues:

"Theoretically the relationship between the media and those with a message is mutually beneficial. The invention of the press release, and budgetary constraints within newsgathering organisations, have meant that news tends to find the journalist, rather than the other way round... When environmentalists ask for money journalists conveniently rediscover moral principles that have lain mouldering..." (1990:19)

Young notes that Survival International have introduced a policy of charging journalists £100 for an hour's consultation. Indeed, Survival International's press and publicity officer claimed: "The absolute worst are film-makers. TV is full of very ambitious people and their careers depend on coming up with ideas, which they pretend to have summoned from out of the blue." (Young, 1990:19)

This dependence upon background information and monitoring by the environmental groups is widespread amongst the media. Indeed, Chris Rose maintained that there was little press coverage of the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change because environmental pressure groups did not supply them with ready-made stories:

"... for example the IPCC, intergovernmental panel on climate change, that is the most important thing going on at the moment. Most of the political decisions have been taken and there's been hardly a squeak out of the press. Why? Because the NGOs haven't spoon fed them all the information for various reasons. Partly because it hasn't been in their interests, partly because they too are overwhelmed by the speed and the scale of events on climate change. But the press have not put sufficient resources into it to actually find out for themselves what is going on." (24th Jan. 1990, p.14)

The mobilisation of resources, then, is crucially important. Research suggests many environmental groups might need to put more resources into targeting material to different groups and to develop ways in which they can manipulate rising curves of public and media concern. Additionally, some environmental organisations could make better use of the potential of radio as a means of communicating information about environmental affairs.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has suggested relations between voluntary and statutory sources and the media have transformed during the last decade. Environmental groups experienced greater access to the media during the late 1980s, and although media interest has decreased some environmental groups have become established news sources. Indeed, it is argued that Hall et al.'s (1978) theory of 'primary definers' fails to account for shifts in the structure of access to the media. Also, it is suggested that there has been a general movement towards the government shifting resources into the private sector; in this way some environmental groups



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# **Chapter Eight**

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## **CASE STUDY OF THE NATIONAL PRESS**

### **COVERAGE OF THE SEAL VIRUS**

- (i) The Background
- (ii) The Agenda-setting Role of the Popular Press
- (iii) The Seals Story as an Issue Threshold for Environmental Awareness
- (iv) The Agenda-building Role of Sources

## **Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the coverage of the recent seal epidemic, which was first extensively reported by the national press during the summer of 1988. The case study illustrates how national press coverage can, in particular instances, have a direct effect upon the political agenda. It suggests that there is complex interaction between the scientific agenda, political priorities, media coverage and public attitudes towards environmental issues. Also, it is suggested that The Daily Mail's sustained 'Save our Seals' campaign played a major part in raising environmental issues to the top of the political list of priorities, as did the activities of representatives of environmental pressure groups. The 'Save our Seals' campaign mobilised huge public support which alerted Conservative back-benchers to the strength of The Daily Mail readers' concern about wider environmental issues.

Moreover, the controversy over the causes of the seal virus illustrates the fundamental conflict between the 'needs and perceptions' of scientists linked to government bodies and the 'values and constraints' affecting media practitioners. Scientists tend to be suspicious of journalists and are often reluctant or ill-equipped to communicate their work, which tends to be conducted over a long time span (cf. Dunwoody, 1986). On the other hand, journalists work to very tight deadlines and require digestible, eye-catching stories. Also, the ambiguity and uncertainty of scientific knowledge conflicts with journalists' news values and their preoccupation with immediate, concrete events. However, in recent years a greater understanding and co-operation between journalists and scientists has been fostered by organisations such as the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the CIBA Foundation's resource service. As John Durant, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, argues:

"Gone are the days when most scientists shunned the press and looked with disdain upon colleagues who stooped to 'vulgar popularisation'. More and more, scientists are positively seeking the limelight, the attitude towards anyone along the corridor already basking in it is not disdain but envy." ('A Healthy Glow of Publicity', The Independent, March 21st 1989:38)

However, this chapter suggests that British marine biologists at the Sea Mammal Research Unit, funded by the Natural Environment Research Council, and virologists at the Dutch Institute for Public Health and Environmental Protection, displayed a somewhat

undeveloped and suspicious attitude towards UK national newspapers. The press coverage of the seal plague highlighted the important role that sources play as 'gatekeepers', as well as displaying that the attitudes of scientists and journalists towards each other can be of crucial importance. Different sources acted as 'primary definers' at various stages of the evolution of the epidemic and modified their views over time. Dutch virologists carrying out research into the causes of the virus generally refused to offer speculation about possible explanations to the press. During the summer and autumn of 1988 scientists at the Dutch National Institute for Public Health, who were investigating possible links with PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), were reluctant to release information about the results of their research, preferring to wait until their findings were published by the scientific journal, 'Nature'. The popular press wanted to be able to report likely explanations for the seal virus and through using sources such as Greenpeace, who would agree to speculate, they found a way of connecting the usual seasonal reports on water pollution and dirty beaches with the seal virus. The popular press, particularly in the early stages of the coverage of the seal virus, favoured the explanation that pollution was related to the seal deaths.

Further, the case study illustrates that general newspaper coverage of the seal epidemic, and the tabloid press in particular, focused upon the threat to humans even though newspapers such as The Daily Mail raised a great deal of money for the seal sanctuaries. Indeed, one of the reasons why seals are so appealing is their human-like characteristics; they have been variously described as dog-eyed, placid and tearful. Some popular papers reinforced their readers' identification with the seals by including the injured seals' human names, such as 'Rosie' and 'Emma'. Essentially they were portrayed as pets rather than as wild animals. And the seals virus was covered in the classic tabloid entertainment format with famous personalities such as David Bellamy, Frank Bruno, Benny Hill and Kim Wilde being used by popular papers to engage readers' attention. Moreover, by suggesting that a major explanation for the outbreak was pollution, a human rather than a natural cause, they implied that humans could play a direct part in controlling it.



**(i) The Background**

In April 1988 a large number of common seals around the coast of Denmark were found to be dying from a mystery disease which affected their immune systems. Later, in July and August 1988, the disease was discovered to be affecting great numbers of common seals along the Norfolk coast in Britain. Between April 1988 and January 1989, over 17,000 common seals around Europe were discovered dead. The symptoms of the disease varied but included respiratory problems, skin lesions, lethargy and abortion. At first marine biologists thought that the Danish epidemic was caused by pollution because it occurred around the same time as an outbreak of algae blooms in the Baltic. However, once the disease began to spread to Sweden, Norway, the Dutch Waddenzee and to the North coast of the Federal Republic of Germany, virologists maintained that it was probably caused by a viral infection since there was no clear evidence that these waters were polluted. Initially two viruses were identified in the dead seals: herpes virus and picorna virus. By September 1988 the current scientific theory was that it was a form of canine distemper (a disease with similar symptoms that affects dogs). Some scientists also thought that pollution had lowered the seals' immunity to the disease and there were fears that the virus might spread to dolphins and porpoises.

At this time environmental issues, such as the pollution of the North Sea, were growing in political importance across Europe. The environment became one of the key issues in the Swedish and Danish General Elections in September 1988. Indeed, an article in The Guardian suggested:

"It is especially difficult for a Swedish Prime Minister with an election just around the corner to dismiss the image, flashed onto TV screens each night as more and more seals, both dead and dying, wash up on the local beaches."  
(20th August, 1988, p.18)

The Dutch and Danish preoccupation with the North Sea is closely tied up with cultural factors. They view the state of the North Sea as more of a political priority since the fishing industry is vital to their economies (cf. Hansen 1990b). In Britain, this cultural climate did not exist and political attention was largely sparked off through The Daily Mail's campaign.

By October 1988 virologists in Britain had identified a phocine distemper virus (PDV), similar to the canine distemper virus (CDV) that affects dogs, but unique to seals. PDV is a morbillivirus which is similar to measles in humans. However, the precise cause of the virus, and the role which pollution played, is still far from clear. The Natural Environment Research Council is currently conducting a five year project to investigate the links between pollution and the seal deaths.

## **(ii) The Agenda-Setting Role Of The Popular Press**

The case study of the seal plague illustrates the way in which the press can, in certain instances, play an important part in moulding the political agenda (Lang and Lang, 1981; Solesbury, 1976; Downs, 1973; Stringer and Richardson, 1980; Schoenfeld, Meier and Griffin, 1979). Although there is no simple correlation between the political agenda and the media agenda. There are complex interactions between the political, public, scientific and media agendas. In what follows the concept 'political agenda' is defined as the parliamentary table of priorities, 'public agenda' as the degree of concern attached to various social issues by the public, 'scientific agenda' as the ranking of the importance of scientific knowledge by scientists and the 'media agenda' as the range of topics that the media presents us with.

It has been widely acknowledged that the The Daily Mail's 'Save Our Seals' campaign, launched in August 1988 and sustained for over a year, alerted members of the public and Conservative politicians to the wider network of issues concerning the quality of the environment as a whole. Indeed, it appears that one of the factors that led Mrs Thatcher to make her 'green' speech was The Daily Mail's campaign, which brought to her attention the strength of public concern about environmental issues. Richard North, Environment Correspondent on The Independent, stated on Radio Four's Today programme that it was The Daily Mail's coverage of the Karin B affair, [The ship carrying a cargo of toxic waste which was refused entrance at Liverpool Port in August 1988] and the seal virus, which forced Mrs Thatcher to take action:

"She would read the same thing millions of times in The Guardian, The Times and The Independent and say these people are whingers. But when The Daily Mail takes it up she realises it must be a genuine popular concern and she is sensible enough a politician to follow their lead." (Quoted in The Daily Mail, 29th September, 1988)

Indeed, Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent for The Times, argued:

"The Daily Mail was the newspaper that took up this campaign and really put this onto the public agenda and it is down to David English and The Daily Mail, it seems to me, as much as anyone else in the news media, for putting the environment on the agenda with the seals campaign." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.2)

However, one should not assume that The Daily Mail campaign had a direct effect upon readers. Public opinion polls suggest that concern about environmental issues had been gradually rising over a long period of time as the general quality of life has improved (Anthony, 1982). Indeed, as Lang and Lang (1981) have argued, one weakness of agenda-setting studies has been that they have tended to assume that the public are directly influenced by media agendas (cf. McQuail, 1987). Furthermore, such studies have devoted little attention to analysing the process through which agendas are built and social problems are transformed into political issues:

"...the agenda-setting hypothesis - the bland and unqualified statement that the mass media set the agenda for political campaigns - attributes to the media at one and the same time too little and too much influence. The whole question of how issues originate is sidestepped, nor is there any recognition of the process through which agendas are built or through which an object which has caught public attention, by being big news, gives rise to a political issue. In other words, while agenda-setting, like most research, suffers from methodological shortcomings, the more basic problems are conceptual." (Lang and Lang, 1981: 448)

In the lead up to The Daily Mail campaign environmental issues were gradually becoming more prominent in Europe and there was increasing scientific evidence that global warming was taking place. In both political and scientific terms, then, the environment came to be seen as a legitimate and pressing issue. As early as October 1987 The Mail on Sunday carried a feature which used the seals story as a way of focusing attention on environmental issues in general. It claimed: "Pollution is being blamed for an unprecedented number of common seals found dead or dying on the North Norfolk coast." This was followed by a series of 'DOOMWATCH' reports in The Mail on Sunday between October 1987 and August 1988. These were accompanied by the logo: 'The Environment; the newspaper that cares'. However, it was not until the summer of 1988 that the seals crisis hit saturation coverage and The Daily Mail turned it into a sustained campaign. This prompted

other rival popular newspapers such as The Daily Express and The Daily Star to launch their own campaigns. James Davies, Environment Correspondent for The Daily Express, effectively admitted that the newspaper's decision to set up a 'Save our Seas' campaign was probably influenced by the activities of The Daily Mail:

"It's quite possible that we were prompted by the fact that other newspapers were running campaigns on the environment and that we ought to have a campaign to ourselves." (31st Oct. 1989, p.8)

Also, the success of The Daily Mail campaign led many of the broadsheets to focus upon the seals issue. Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent for The Times, maintained:

"Well the key thing is that The Daily Mail led the way and dragged everybody along behind them. I mean in the end I can remember there was a certain amount of scoffing in The Times when that began but then they suddenly realised that they ought to follow it." (22nd Feb. 1991, p.25)

Indeed, the seals issue received widespread coverage in virtually all of the national daily newspapers (see Tables 17 and 18 overleaf).



The content analysis of national newspaper coverage indicated that the highest number of items (28) in the quality press were carried by The Guardian, the daily newspaper traditionally most associated with coverage of the environment, and The Independent, well-known for its team of science reporters. Both of these newspapers had their own specialist reporters for scientific and environmental affairs. However, the The Daily Mail carried an impressive 24 items, since it did not have a specialist science or environment reporter and it did not have as much space as many of the other newspapers. Indeed, it contained twice as many items as its middle-market rivals and it was the only paper to carry two front page leads. The Star carried double the number of items (8) as The Sun (4), including one editorial on the seal virus. The Financial Times, like The Sun, gave the issue sparse coverage; clearly these newspapers viewed the seal virus as of little interest to readers. John Hunt, Environment Correspondent for The Financial Times, suggested:

"... some of the things that are very important are boring, that's the trouble... I mean I suppose it's slightly easier for me because to some extent we can be a bit more technical than other papers because of our readership, and a bit more weighty perhaps. It's very difficult, I should imagine, to write for a popular paper. That of course is why papers, pop papers, and people like television, love an issue like the seals. You know, there's pictures, and quite mistaken pictures actually. I mean you've got gooey-eyed little seals, apparently they're quite dangerous. You know, if you get too near to them they're quite likely to take your hand off or something. But people will get dewy-eyed about these issues won't they. " (24th Jan. 1989, pp. 16-17)

Indeed, the only daily newspapers to publish readers' letters on the seals issue during August were The Guardian and the mid-market press. The Daily Mail and The Guardian printed five letters each, while both Today and The Daily Express carried two. Indeed, the reason why The Daily Mail decided to campaign on the seals issue was clearly related to its market position and to its identity as a Conservative newspaper. Clearly, it wanted to appeal to its largely Conservative readership who were becoming increasingly concerned about the environment, it aimed to attract new readers, and it wanted to put pressure on the Government to take action on environmental issues. Also, the newspaper has a history of featuring animal stories (cf. Nicholson, 1987).



The seal virus, then, was used by the popular press as a peg to focus upon environmental issues in the broader sense. The seals story marked an issue-threshold for environmental issues, which were already attracting considerable concern from the public.

**(iii) The Seals Story As An Issue Threshold For Environmental Awareness**

An important question raised by previous agenda-setting studies is how certain issues, which have received some initial media interest, come to attract sustained coverage and political attention (Downs, 1973; Solesbury, 1976; Lang and Lang, 1981). It appears that issues are sustained both by factors intrinsic to the nature of the issue, by a certain degree of fortuitousness and by external social and political forces. In the case of the seals story one of the factors which kept it alive was that it satisfied a number of news values. The seal plague marked an issue threshold; from the summer of 1988 onwards environmental problems in general came to be viewed as legitimate concerns.

One reason why the seal plague attracted so much media coverage during August 1988 was that it was during this month that the first affected seals in Britain were discovered to be dying in large numbers along the Norfolk coast; this constituted a key news 'event' for the British media. Often it is a specific event which draws attention to general issues concerning the environment (Solesbury, 1976). Some journalists feel that The Daily Mail was prompted to set up a campaign after the seal virus came to Lord Rothermere's attention through his daughter's concern about environmental issues. Whether this is purely anecdotal or not, the newspaper had already decided to start up a wildlife campaign with a strong human interest component and the seals story provided all of these elements. As Chris Rose, director of Media Natura, observed:

"The Daily Mail wanted to do something which combined human interest, like Aids for example, with animals and they already wanted to do that before they heard about the seals. And the seals thing was brought to their attention via I think it was Lord Rothermere's daughter, a friend of whose is interested in environmental issues, or several of her friends are... You know, they decided they wanted to do something and the seals thing combined animals, which was their traditional way of covering environmental stories, with disease. You know it was a virus so it was a bit like Aids... it meant that you were dealing with the fate of animals at an individual level and people can relate to that, and especially Daily Mail readers who are largely women and relatively well off. So it was an ideal story for them." (24th Jan. 1990, p.15)





Indeed Peter Usher, reporter for The Daily Mail's 'Save Our Seals' campaign, maintained that the seal plague enabled the public to visualise and identify emotionally with the effects of environmental pollution:

"I believe that the seals disaster had one very, very positive effect which was to shock people into the realisation that, you know, man cannot go on polluting the environment without, you know, a very heavy price to pay. And you see the scientists can talk about the damage to the ozone layer and, you know, the dangers of dumping chemicals in the sea until they're blue in the face. But, you know, people aren't touched by that, they can't visualise it... And the reason why the seals did was here are these beautiful creatures that people adore, just very, very touching and human-like in their own way, suddenly die." ( 25th July 1989, p.8)

Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for The Daily Mail, agreed:

"... the story had a lot of ingredients which made it an obvious one to choose as a big campaign issue. Seals have sweet friendly faces and doleful eyes and so their plight was a very emotive one. And the pictures, as far as newspapers are concerned, I always think in terms of pictures, and they made quite a lot of very good pictures. And it seemed at the time that what was happening to them was something to do with pollution of the seas. Although that's very much in doubt now at the time it seemed that was the most obvious cause. And so if you think there's so many animal lovers and increasingly people were being more interested in the environment then those two factors, combined, probably made it a very good story to campaign on." (25th July 1989, pp. 6-7)

Moreover, James Davies, Environment Correspondent for The Daily Express suggested that visually appealing animals, such as seals or dolphins, are often used by the tabloid press as a peg to introduce less emotive issues:

"The dolphin is such a cheerful animal, you know, its great big grin on its face, that people can identify with it and as being sort of man's friend in the ocean... it's easier to attract sympathy for the dolphin than it might be for an ugly-looking bottle-nosed whale. But since it is the bottle-nosed that is extinct you actually let people know that by doing a story about dolphins as well! It's how you hook the reader and then get them involved in what the real issue is and that is, you know, if you keep killing the bottle-nosed there won't be one left by the turn of the century." (31st Oct. 1989, p.6)

A further factor which helped sustain the seals story was that many famous individuals, including several from the entertainment industry, were willing to pledge their support. Since there is such a high degree of competition between stories within papers, this gave the seals issue an added dimension. As Downs argues:

"The requirement that a problem be dramatic and exciting is important to the maintenance of public interest in it because *all news is in reality "consumed" by much of the American public (and by publics everywhere) largely as a form of entertainment.* As such it competes with other types of entertainment for a share of each person's time. Hence in the fierce struggle for space in the highly limited universe of television viewing time or news print, each issue must vie not only with other social problems but also with a multitude of non news items that are often far more pleasant to the public to contemplate." (original emphasis, 1973:67)

A number of popular newspapers used an entertainment approach to attract readers to the seals story. For example, the seals campaigns by The People and Today were launched by David Bellamy. And The People offered seal badges, posters and stickers to readers. Perhaps the newspaper which became most strongly associated with this approach was The Daily Mail. Indeed, the fact that Peter Usher, a reporter for The Daily Mail's 'Save Our Seals' campaign, was previously The Daily Mail's Show Business Reporter was clearly evident in the paper's coverage of the seal virus. Over eighteen of the seal stories printed by the newspaper between August and December 1988 were principally about the involvement of celebrities with the seals issue. And special T-shirts and sweatshirts were designed to promote the campaign. Peter Usher explained:

"... it kind of ranged from actors and actresses, all sorts of show business stars, sports personalities, a very, very wide range, some quite interesting people. You know, we got Micky Rooney and Ann Miller for the sweatshirt, Frank Bruno before his title fight. I mean we got into some bizarre situations of people wearing sweatshirts in unusual places, all of which combined to make a very powerful visual image. In the paper the sweatshirt itself had a picture of a pup's face on the front of it and it was a very, very touching sort of image anyway." (25th July 1989, p. 2)

The approach that was taken by The Daily Mail clearly generated a huge number of stories and partly explains how the seals issue was sustained over such a long period. Peter Usher maintained:

"... we carried a seal story, I think, certainly every day for three months... I struggle to think of another campaign run in recent times by a newspaper that has given such sustained sort of support in the newspaper. But of course it was relatively easy to do because if there wasn't a news story on, you know, what was happening in various parts of the country, if there weren't features on the people who were treating the seals, if there wasn't front line reports on, you know, going out in boats or land rovers, you know, recovering seals with the rescue workers, then there'd be sweatshirt pictures that could be put in the paper or details of the latest fundraising." (25th July 1989, pp. 2-3)

A further news value satisfied by the seals story was human interest, not just in terms of the personalities involved with the story, but concerning the possible effects upon human beings. The popular press, in particular, played upon the threat water pollution posed to humans. They suggested that if pollution was killing large number of seals (which are at the top of the food chain) then it must be doing some harm to us. And in this way the tabloids found a way of connecting their traditional way of covering environmental issues during the summer break with a story which involved an unknown virus spreading among attractive animals. For example, a full-page editorial in The Mail on Sunday claimed:

"Be in no doubt the problem of the seals is only a tiny part of a potentially calamitous problem. Three weeks ago this newspaper reported that three young boys in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, had developed a mysterious and debilitating ailment, causing near paralysis in their legs. The cause? Almost certainly a virus contracted whilst swimming in sewage-polluted seas near their home." (August 28th, 1988, p.8)

A cartoon in in the same edition of the newspaper also concentrated upon the threat to humans. It depicted a man wading in the sea. The caption went: "Now wash your hands". (See Figure 2 overleaf).





Similarly The Daily Express implied that the virus might be linked to Aids and quoted 'independent scientist', Pat Gowan, as stating: "I believe the virus attacking the seals may well be the AIDS virus which has been put into the North Sea through the human untreated sewage of AIDS victims." (28th August, 1988)

The popular press, then, tended to offer the explanation that the virus was linked with pollution even though there was a lot of uncertainty among scientists as to the precise cause of the disease. The tabloid papers did not want to report that a disease was killing common seals but no one knew what was causing it, as that would not have been so newsworthy. A crucial problem is that newspapers do not like dealing with uncertainties, whilst in the vast majority of cases the causes of environmental problems are contested and some of the solutions are viewed as costing too much. Peter Usher of The Daily Mail explained:

"... you can't write a story saying six seal pups are dying of something and it might be the virus. You make a decision and you say, you know, the virus has returned. And within that story you say tests are still being carried out but the workers at the centre are almost positive that it is the work of the virus." (25th July 1989, p.5)

Similarly James Davies, Environment Correspondent of The Daily Express claimed:

"Nobody quite knew what it was and therefore pollution was, I think, an easy target wasn't it, initially. I mean even some of the scientists themselves in the very early days weren't too sure and said it could well be some chemical pollutant which was doing this. So they weren't terribly sure initially. It wasn't until the laboratories got to work and samples were taken from the seals that they arrived that they were dealing with a distemper that is not that dissimilar to canine distemper." (31st Oct. 1989, pp. 7-8)

Instead of observing that *some* scientists believed pollution was responsible it was frequently claimed that *scientists* thought pollution was the cause of the seal deaths. This gave the impression that scientists were in agreement that pollution was involved, whilst in reality most scientists merely stressed that pollution could not be ruled out at this stage. The Daily Mail, in its early coverage, almost overwhelmingly quoted scientists or environmentalists who believed that pollution was responsible. The content analysis indicated that eight out of the twenty four items coded mentioned that pollution may have

been a cause of the virus as a major theme. A further four items reported the view that pollution had lowered the seals immunity and only one item mentioned the uncertainty surrounding the cause of the virus as a prominent theme. Moreover, Table 20 shows that a total of 19 representatives of environmental or animal welfare organisations were quoted by The Daily Mail, while the views of 12 scientists were reported and only 5 government sources and 1 representative of industry were quoted.

<b>Table 20</b>	
<b><u>Sources of The Daily Mail's coverage during August 1988</u></b>	
<u>Government</u>	
Junior minister for the environment	2
Back bench Conservatives	1
Members of the European Parliament	1
Spokesperson for the DoE	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>5</b>
<u>Scientists</u>	
Statement by a foreign scientist	4
Representative of the Sea Mammal Research Unit, Cambridge	3
Scientists in general	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>
<u>Environmental/Animal Welfare Organisations</u>	
Environmentalists in general	3
Representative of Greenpeace	5
Representative of FoE	1
Representative of the RSPCA	4
Representative of a British seal rescue centre	5
Representative of the Seal Rescue Centre at Pieterburn, Holland	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>19</b>
<u>Representatives of industry</u>	
	1
<u>Members of the Public</u>	
	4
<u>Miscellaneous</u>	
Environmental Health Officer	1
Celebrities	2
Not clear/cannot code	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>OVERALL TOTAL</b>	<b>45</b>



Although The Daily Mail won the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) special media award for its coverage of the seal virus, and raised a tremendous amount of money to fund seal sanctuaries, it has come under attack from some prominent scientists. The Daily Mail announced in a front page lead that scientists at the Sea Mammal Research Unit had opted to vaccinate seals against the virus when, in actual fact, they had serious doubts about the viability of this method:

"Today The Daily Mail unveils its emergency action programme to save the grey seal population of Britain from the scourge of disease and pollution which could wipe it out... Supplies of vaccine to combat the virus which is destroying adult seals have been ordered from Holland. On the islands, the team will set about protecting the newborn pups from the disease decimating the older generation." (9th September 1988, p.1 & p.2)

These assertions angered some scientists and an article in the the 'New Scientist' criticised The Daily Mail's approach. It stated:

"A national newspaper in Britain is calling for donations from its readers for a fund that would vaccinate wild grey seals against canine distemper virus, which has killed 11,000 common seals in the North Sea since April. But scientists working with the seals say the methods proposed by the *Daily Mail* to 'save our seals' are not practicable and may not even be desirable." ('Folly of a newspaper's plan to save seals', the 'New Scientist', 15th September 1988, p.29)

Indeed, Peter Usher, a reporter on the 'Save Our Seals' campaign, admitted that this had been a mistake:

"We ran one story talking about... I mean basically we pinned a lot of hope in there being a vaccine. And I mean scientists and environmentalists were just saying why are they so keen on that because it can't be administered and never could be administered to seals in the wild. But because there were people who thought that possibly it could, you know, it was something that we did. And in retrospect obviously you wouldn't have done that." (25th July 1989, p.10)

As Nicholas Schoon, former Science Correspondent of The Independent, observes:

"For the environmentalists and the popular press this was enough; pollution must have allowed the new epidemic to penetrate and spread. It meshed in with the belief that the millions of tonnes of sewage, industrial waste, fertiliser and pesticide poured into the North Sea had reached a critical level." ('Deadly seal virus returns to the Orkneys', The Independent, 29th July 1989, p.3)

Indeed David Lavigne, professor of Zoology at the University of Guelph, maintains that there is still no evidence to suggest that the seals immune systems were weakened by such viral infections:

"While few seriously considered the involvement of the Aids virus, the supposition that the seals had depressed immune systems, which left them particularly vulnerable to viral infections, remains. Yet, despite widespread media coverage to the contrary, there is no evidence that immunosuppression predisposed the seals to the plague." ('The BBC Wildlife Magazine', July 1989: 438)

Generally the quality newspapers were more cautious in their coverage of the seal plague. Perhaps this reflected the fact that items on the seal virus in the serious press tended to be written by Science Correspondents, whilst stories in the popular press were largely written by various general reporters or Features Editors (see Table 21). Also, the broadsheets have more scope to discuss weighty scientific issues.

<u>The Times</u>	Andrew Morgan, general reporter
<u>The Independent</u>	Nicholas Schoon, Science Correspondent
<u>The Guardian</u>	Various reporters and Science Correspondent
<u>The Daily Telegraph</u>	Various reporters and Science Correspondent
<u>The Financial Times</u>	Unnamed reporters
<u>The Daily Mail</u>	June Southwork, Features Editor
<u>The Daily Express</u>	Various reporters
<u>The Daily Mirror</u>	Frank Palmer, Features Editor
<u>Today</u>	Russell Jenkins, Features Editor
<u>The Sun</u>	Various reporters
<u>The Star</u>	Various reporters

However, many of the quality newspapers suggested that pollution was *not* responsible for the seal deaths but this had not been established by scientists anymore than the theory that pollution caused the tragedy. This relates, in part, to inter-paper rivalry but

also to the desire to present news in terms of certainties. For example, an article written by Roger Highfield, The Daily Telegraph's Science Correspondent, was entitled: "Death of seals not caused by pollution". However, an editorial in The Times was more wary about making assumptions about the role which pollution played:

"Despite confident assertions that pollution is the culprit there is, as yet, no clear evidence of why North Sea seals are dying in such disturbing numbers. There are several contending theories, and none of them can wholly be discounted at this point." (26th August 1988)

Richard North took a more sceptical line on The Independent and criticised the press in general for suggesting that pollution explained the outbreak of the disease:

"... everybody was rushing round saying the seals are dying, they're clearly being poisoned and that's obviously because the North Sea is getting dirtier. And the problem with that is, yes, the seals were dying but they probably weren't dying of pollution and if they were that would be odd since there's less rather than more pollution in the North Sea. The North Sea is cleaner than it used to be so why are seals suddenly dying? Well you can come up with all sorts of theories about that and people did, as to say well maybe it's an incremental thing and the seals died because they're the straw that broke the camel's back. Actually months later it looks as if pollution wasn't in the frame. It might have been a contributory factor or something like that. So with more coverage you get worse coverage in a way. Now that's partly because there are people running around obeying their Editor's commands to come up with environmental stories which isn't at all the business of informing the public about what's going on in the environment. It is the business of discovering sexy issues to put in front of the public even if they have to fib a bit." (15th March 1989, pp.3-4)

So one of the major reasons why the seals story was sustained by the press was that it fulfilled important news values. The story was triggered by an event, it included a strong visual element which people could identify with, it centred upon human interest and it provided a means by which the popular press could present environmental issues in a light-weight entertainment format.

However, a number of other factors explain how the seal plague came to act as a issue-threshold for environmental issues in general. Had the seal virus not come to light in Britain during the summer break then things might have been quite different. It was

fortuitous that the outbreak occurred during the 'silly season' when Parliament was in recess and there was little political or business news around, for it meant that the seals issue did not have to compete with so many 'hard' news items (cf. Lang and Lang, 1981:453). Also, by concentrating upon the pollution angle, the media were able to provide an engaging way of covering the usual summer focus on the state of Britain's beaches.

Once The Daily Mail launched its 'Save Our Seals' campaign, and demonstrated the strength of public interest in environmental issues, other newspapers followed. In this sense The Daily Mail can also be seen to have set the agenda for other popular newspapers. As Schoenfeld, Meier and Griffin have argued:

"Once such a legitimate news category has come into existence, different orders of meaning and association cluster together, and produce more media space. Hence the discovery of the 'environment' as a social problem in 1969-70 had an effect on 'news values', perhaps an even greater effect than environmental events would justify at any one time." (1979:50)

However, the seals story did not become an issue-threshold merely through extensive media coverage; the activities of sources were of crucial importance. The seals issue was sustained by the various social actors who were involved because it was, for different reasons, in their interests to do so. As Lavigne maintains:

"I think the reason why TV and the press took up the issues so readily is directly related to the involvement of marine mammals (remember the gray whales in Alaska). This, together with pollution, and the prevailing political environment, made seal plague a timely story - one which scientists, environmentalists and politicians were happy to keep going for a variety of reasons." (Personal communication, August 11th, 1989)

A key weakness of previous agenda-setting studies is that they have tended to pay little attention to the role that sources play in constructing the agenda (Solesbury, 1976). The case study of the seal plague indicates that sources play a central role in building media agendas.

#### **(iv) The Agenda-Building Role Of Sources**

The process by which the seal virus was transformed from being viewed as a purely scientific issue into being seen as a *political* issue was complex. The activities of sources, be they scientists, environmentalists or politicians, were crucial in this process because it was these sources who first 'defined' the nature of the problem, rather than the media, and they continued to influence the subsequent development of the agenda. Moreover, the institutionalisation of environmental issues through government departments and non-governmental organisations was important. Since the 1970s environmental groups have become more sophisticated in dealing with the media. Schoenfeld, Meier and Griffin (1979) noted that in the case of America:

"Environmental issues gained stable press attention both because the issues had become professionalized- 'descholared' - and because they had been placed in the care of people who not only 'spoke the same language' as reporters and editors but were adept at creating the interpersonal communication that leads to space in the press." (1979:51)

Indeed, the seals story illustrates how the relationship between sources and the media can be of great importance in shaping the political agenda. While the activities of Greenpeace displayed a sophisticated understanding of the workings of the press, the response made by Dutch virologists demonstrated a somewhat undeveloped and suspicious attitude towards the media. One of the major sources that the media used for the seals story was Greenpeace. The environmental organisation developed a successful strategy by using the seal deaths to draw attention to their anti-pollution campaign. They mounted an advertising campaign during August 1988 in the national daily press which suggested that pollution was responsible for the plague (see Table 22). The Greenpeace advertisement claimed: "The scientists confirm the very strong indications that pollution is contributing to the seals' deaths." (What the advertisement failed to mention was that there was a considerable amount of uncertainty amongst scientists as to what extent pollution was to blame).

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Positioning</u>
<u>The Guardian</u>	3	Front page
<u>The Independent</u>	3	Leader page (2), front page (1)
<u>The Times</u>	2	Front page
<u>Today</u>	2	Diary/gossip page
<u>The Observer</u>	2	Front page
<u>The Daily Telegraph</u>	1	Weekend section
<u>The Daily Mail</u>	1	Diary/gossip page
<u>The Mail on Sunday</u>	1	Leader page
<u>The Sunday Times</u>	1	Front page

Table 22 suggests that the Greenpeace advertising campaign in the tabloids was directed towards the largely Conservative, middle-class, female readership of Today and The Daily Mail. Indeed, Greenpeace media director, Sue Adams, maintained:

"We advertised knowing we'd get its Tory readers, asking them to phone up the DoE to ask what they were doing about it. They were so inundated they couldn't cope and suddenly realised there were a lot of Tory voters out there who really cared about these issues. This forced them to start taking on the green mantle." (cited by Warren, 1990:54)

Also, it is interesting to note that the advertisements in the mid-market press were all carried on entertainment pages which reveals something about the way in which these newspapers cover such issues and assumptions about the level of reader interest. Another way that Greenpeace focused attention upon the seals issue was through organising an international conference held at the Greenpeace scientific unit at Queen Mary College, University of London. And during September 1988 independent scientists, attached to the environmental pressure group, carried out their own research into the links between pollution and the seal deaths. The results of their research, which indicated that there were high concentrations of mercury in the livers of seals in the Wash and the Irish Sea, were promptly sent to the press and received wide coverage. Two years on, Greenpeace still maintain that pollution was a factor, although they have to some extent modified their position:

"The factors involved in any epidemic are complex. The potential involvement of pollution in this recent European seal 'die-off' still requires consideration. The continuous movement of persistent chemicals into the marine environment has been seen for some time by some authorities as a potential cause for the eventual extinction of marine mammals. If we add to this possibility an increase in epidemics associated with increased ambient temperatures then the future of whales, dolphins and seals looks far from assured." (Letter by Mark Simmonds, Greenpeace Research Associate, published in the 'BBC Wildlife Magazine', October, 1990:709)

Whilst Greenpeace mounted a pro-active campaign to attract media attention, Dutch scientists at the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and Environmental Protection, who doubted that pollution was a central factor, largely shunned the media. When the seal virus was first discovered Dutch scientists began a lengthy research programme to investigate possible explanations. In the UK, research was carried out by the Sea Mammal Research Unit at Cambridge University. Particularly during the early stages of investigation Dutch virologists generally refused to speculate about possible causes of the disease. However, some scientists such as Professor Vasserman at Kiel University, West Germany, suggested to the media that particular theories could not be ruled out, such as the theory that pollution was a cause of the seal virus. Also some scientists suggested that the virus spread from East Canadian harp seals to common seals. This provided some spurious claims with a degree of legitimacy. As Professor Lavigne claims:

"This suggestion required such a convoluted chain of events that it should never have been taken seriously, but taken seriously it was. Newspapers published maps describing the envisaged route of infection, and scientists lent it credibility by mentioning it in the media as a possibility that could not be ruled out " ('BBC Wildlife Magazine', July 1989:438)

Dr Osterhaus and colleagues at the Dutch Institute for Public Health and Environmental Protection told journalists that they would not reveal their findings until they were published in the British science journal, 'Nature' (which has a policy of not offering unpublished evidence to the media). Finally, the Dutch government put pressure on the scientists to reveal the basis of their findings a couple of days before they were due to be published. This suspicious attitude towards the media, particularly towards the popular newspapers, meant that Greenpeace was able to act as the principal 'gatekeeper' in the early 'definition' period. The theory that pollution had caused the seal virus provided the tabloid

newspapers with a dramatic story, which fitted in with major news values, and manipulated a growing concern about health related issues among the public. A fundamental conflict arose, then, between the scientists' lengthy research cycle and the media cycle of daily news stories.

As Lavigne argues:

"The media and some environmentalists were not interested in theories that might take months or even years to examine; they wanted instant explanations and immediate action." ('Dead Seals and Quick Sand', 'BBC Wildlife Magazine', July 1989, p.438)

As scientists became more accustomed to dealing with the media, Peter Usher of The Daily Mail claimed that they became less suspicious of the tabloid press. Although, more cynically, some scientists may have seen this as a way of getting more money. The fact that The Daily Mail donated some of the money it raised towards scientific research on the virus may have made scientists feel under obligation towards the newspaper. For example, £50,000 was donated to the Sea Mammal Research Unit at Cambridge. This obviously raises the question of the ethics of scientists accepting money from a national newspaper (cf. 'The New Scientist', 15th Sept. 1988)

Greenpeace defined the seal deaths as a *political* issue and this, together with the resulting media coverage, forced politicians to respond. The Department of the Environment claimed that pollution was not responsible for the seal virus. Former Secretary and Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Nicholas Ridley and Virginia Bottomley, argued that the plague was caused by a virus which had occurred naturally. Press officer (2) at the Department of the Environment suggested that the reason why government sources were not quoted as many times as environmental organisations was that their response was not as newsworthy. Press Officer (2) claimed:

"Well that [pollution] made the headlines... you could always find an expert to say that, or someone that could call on an expert, particularly if they happen to be attached to one of the organisations which was putting the pressure on... The environmental pressure groups were giving the headlines which they were looking for... what we will say will actually kill their stories. So they tend, if they know that's going to be the case, not to come to us, or if they don't they will ignore what we say." (28th May, 1991, pp. 6-7)



Of course, it was in their interests to suggest that Britain should wait until there was firm evidence before introducing costly anti-pollution measures. But the definition of the problem as a political issue ensured that it continued to attract prominent media coverage and political attention. As Lang and Lang suggest:

"The process is a continuous one, involving a number of feedback loops, most important among which are the way political figures see their own image mirrored in the media, the pooling of information within the press corps, and the various indicators of the public response. We argue that a topic, problem or key issue to which political leaders are or should be paying attention to is not yet an issue. Important as the media may be in focusing attention, neither awareness or perceived importance makes an issue. However, once the above-mentioned links are established, a topic may continue to be an issue even if other topics receive greater emphasis in the media." (1981:446)

Indeed, as Solesbury acknowledges, it is only when a number of conditions have been satisfied that government reacts to an issue:

"Issues finally evoke responses from governments when they have become powerful enough to capture public resources, when they become the subject of political debate, when they come to dominate the media, when organisations grow around them conducting campaigns both for and against responses and when they begin to be used to gain influence and money." (1976:383)

The role of sources as 'gatekeepers', then, is fundamental to the agenda-building process. Non-governmental organisations do not generally attract widespread media attention unless their demands are viewed as legitimate by government. However, in the case of the seals issue, Greenpeace managed to secure considerable media interest. This seems, in part, to reflect the fact that other prominent sources, such as government and scientists linked to government bodies, failed to act quickly enough in order to 'define' the problem.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The case study has suggested, then, that the popular press, on some occasions, play an important role in setting the political agenda. Indeed, the role of the media as definers in the agenda-setting process has been overlooked by Hall et al. (1978). Sometimes the media take up themes which are later adopted by key institutional sources, such as the government. However, if one analyses the process through which agendas are constructed then it becomes

clear that sources play a crucial role in defining problems which are later taken up by the media. Also, sources play a major role in sustaining issues once they are taken up by the media. Therefore, the relationship between the public agenda, the media agenda and the political table of priorities is complex. As Schlesinger argues:

"... Hall et al.'s model of reproduction deals with the question of the media's relative autonomy from the political system in a purely *unidirectional* way. The movement of definitions as *uniformly* from the power centre to the media. Within this conceptual logic, there is no space to account for occasions on which the media may take the initiative in the definitional process by *challenging* the so-called primary definers and forcing them to respond... At times, too, it is the media which crystallize slogans or themes which are subsequently taken up by the primary definers because it is in their interests to do so." (original emphasis, 1990:67)

Hall et al. fail to consider instances where media influence politicians indirectly through drawing attention to a problem and mobilising the public to place pressure on the government. In the case of the seals issue, Britain's cultural climate was not favourably disposed towards taking action over North Sea pollution and The Daily Mail and The Mail on Sunday were largely responsible for provoking an outcry among Conservative voters.

The case study also suggests that the boundaries of definition shift. While a number of studies indicate that government sources tend to be most accessed by the media, in the case of the seals issue, Greenpeace acted as a key 'primary definer'. Government ministers and scientists linked to government bodies were suspicious of the press and slow to respond. While it was in Greenpeace's interests to act speedily and mobilise public concern about the plight of the seals, it was in the interests of government to stall immediate action and wait for demonstrable evidence to suggest that pollution played a role in the seals deaths.

However, when all is said and done, does it matter that there is still no evidence which suggests that pollution caused the seal virus? Surely any coverage which heightens people's awareness of environmental issues is desirable? Peter Usher, reporter for The Daily Mail 'Save Our Seals' campaign, argued:

"Now it didn't matter that the reason they were dying was a virus and that pollution couldn't be pinned down as the cause of the virus. It didn't matter

because it just woke the realisation that if you go on dumping chemicals in the seas you'll kill all the creatures in the sea. If you go on dumping chemicals in the land you'll kill all the creatures on the land. It's a very simple kind of realisation but I think, I believe, that it was the seals that really drove that point home." (25th July 1989, p.8)

However, in the long term environmentalists may lose credibility if no proven link between pollution and the virus is found. Also, politicians will argue that this shows there is no urgent need to take action on pollution. And what about the plight of animals which do not evoke such an emotional response? As Dr Sidney Holt, a senior United Nations official involved with the International Whaling Commission and currently scientific advisor to the International Fund for Animal Welfare, maintains:

"Constructive responses to both saving the sea and saving seals may be impeded by precipitate actions. Some environmentalists have opportunistically used the seal deaths to support their anti-pollution campaigns. But if no clear link is demonstrated, politicians will be able to say that the need to deal with pollution is less urgent. That is, of course, untrue because other harm to marine life and to us is undoubted." (Letter published in The Sunday Times, 4th Sept. 1988)

Similarly, an editorial in the 'The New Scientist', warned:

"Paradoxically those who are rushing to point the finger at chemicals in the current episode just might prolong that flow of effluent. What happens if pollution is found to have no influence on the spread of the disease, and that the seals die irrespective of the amount of PCBs in their bodies? The public may well want pollution reduced, but the lobbyists for the chemicals industry will rush forward to point out that this was yet another false alarm and tell us how expensive it would be to control the release of chemicals." ('Blinded by Pollution', 'The New Scientist', 1st Sept. 1988, p.27)

The problem is that there is a fundamental conflict between the tendency for scientists to qualify everything and the media dependence upon short, sharp events and clear unqualified statements. Scientists tend to have little training in media relations and they are therefore often suspicious of journalists. Scientists need to develop a greater awareness of the workings of the media and similarly journalists need to cultivate a greater understanding of the constraints which influence scientists. Finally, environmentalists should avoid the

temptation to manipulate the popular press through offering newsworthy explanations for complex phenomena because, in the long term, this may prove counter-productive.

In the following chapter a rather different case study of the relationship between scientists, environmentalists, industry and the press will be discussed. Unlike the seals issue, the Hinkley Inquiry into the building of a second nuclear pressurised water reactor at Hinkley, Somerset, attracted very little interest from the national press. The case study focuses upon the role played by the local press in sustaining interest about nuclear issues which fail to capture attention from the national press.

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# **Chapter Nine**

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## **CASE STUDY OF THE HINKLEY 'C' INQUIRY**

- (i) The Context of the Nuclear Debate
- (ii) The Public Inquiry System
- (iii) The Hinkley 'C' Inquiry: National Newspaper Coverage
- (iv) Local Press Coverage of the Hinkley 'C' Inquiry: Critical Evaluations
- (v) Fairness and the National and Local Press: The Views of the CEGB and the Objectors
- (vi) Power, Resources and Credibility

## **Introduction**

This chapter will discuss local and national press coverage of the public inquiry into the Central Electricity Generating Board's (CEGB) plan to build a second nuclear pressurised water reactor (PWR), Hinkley 'C', on the Somerset coast. Also, it will analyse the media strategies of the major proponents and objectors to the building of Hinkley 'C'. The main proponent of the case was the former CEGB, with Lord Silsoe as Queen's counsel. The CEGB's case rested on government policy; the board maintained that a diversity of fuel sources was needed and, in particular, the non-fossil fuel obligation should be increased. The leading objectors were Stop Hinkley Expansion (SHE), representing more than 90 organisations including Friends of the Earth, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, Greenpeace, and the Consortium of Opposing Local Authorities (COLA) - representing Somerset County Council together with 20 other South West and Welsh organisations. SHE and COLA opposed the construction of Hinkley 'C' on both economic and environmental grounds. Objections were registered by more than 23,000 groups and individuals. The Inquiry started on October 4th 1988 and, after a total of 182 days of sittings, it closed on the 1st December 1989. During this period the privatisation of the electricity industry was firmly on the political agenda, but just as the Inquiry was nearing its conclusion there was a remarkable turnabout of Government policy on nuclear power. On November 9th 1989 John Wakeham, Secretary of State for Energy, announced that all existing nuclear power stations would be withdrawn from the privatisation programme and that all new building of nuclear power stations, with the exception of Sizewell 'B', would come to a standstill until 1994, when their position would be reviewed. This decision was taken on the basis of economic costs rather than on the environmental grounds. Although consent for Hinkley 'C' was granted in September 1990, construction cannot begin until 1994 and it is unlikely that the nuclear pressurised water reactor will ever be erected.

Although a number of researchers have analysed the role of previous public inquiries, such as 1977 Windscale Inquiry and the 1982-1985 Sizewell 'B' Inquiry (Breach, 1978; Wynne, 1982a; Kemp, O'Riordan and Purdue 1984; O'Riordan, Kemp and Purdue, 1985), there has not been any systematic investigation of the role of the media in the reporting of such proceedings. Given the fact that very few members of the public attend such inquiries, media coverage is of crucial importance. The media translate the peculiar legal discourse into

public language and frame the wider debate. The Hinkley 'C' Inquiry provides a particularly interesting case study of the way in which the local press often maintain the momentum of interest in environmental issues under discussion at public inquiries. Burgess (1991), for instance, found that public interest about the Inquiry into the possibility of building a theme park on Rainham Marshes, a valuable conservation site in Essex, was largely sustained through free, regional papers. The national press generally provides sparse, infrequent coverage except at the opening and the close of such proceedings, and when the issues are seen as being important in terms of party politics.

**i) The Context of the Nuclear Debate**

During the 1970s nuclear power became a key political issue across the industrialised world. In the UK, much of this interest has focused upon the controversy surrounding the British Nuclear Fuel (BNFL) nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield, Cumbria, and leukemia clusters. Public fears about environmental risks were heightened by a Yorkshire Television (YTV) documentary, 'Windscale - The Nuclear Laundry', broadcast in November 1983, which claimed that there was a link between the unusually high incidence of childhood leukemia in the vicinity of Sellafield and radioactive discharges from the plant (cf. MacGill, 1987). An excellent study of public perceptions of the controversy by MacGill (1987), acknowledges the complexity and ambiguity of the relationship between public perceptions of risk and media discourse. Reactions to the YTV documentary were both complex and diverse. In general, local responses tended to be quite negative and critical towards the programme. MacGill suggests that much of this can be understood in terms of the social, material and technical investment of local people in the community and their own direct and indirect experience of the nuclear industry. Within twenty-four hours of the documentary being broadcast the government set up the Black Inquiry to investigate possible connections between the high incidence of leukemia and radioactive discharges at Sellafield. The Black Report, published in 1984, was reassuring about the effects of radiation upon the health of the local community. Of particular interest to this study is that MacGill found once the Black Inquiry was underway the national press lost much of their interest until the Black Report was published, but the local Cumbrian press kept the issues alive throughout the length of the Inquiry. MacGill concluded:

"[the media]... touch nerve ends of current interest, and try and sustain themselves for a while on this. In the process, they may occasionally touch deeper chords of public consciousness. At best the media are not only essential communicating channels, but also critical watchdogs and sometimes virtual scientists themselves (whilst also contributing substantially to extrascientific dimensions of ostensibly scientific issues). At worst they are quick and dirty sensationalists." (1987:47)

During the mid 1980s the Sizewell 'B' Public Inquiry accepted the application of the CEGB to build a nuclear pressurised water reactor on the east Suffolk coastline (cf. Baker, 1988). A crisis of public confidence in nuclear power was growing, heightened by the 1986 Chernobyl accident in the Soviet Union, when a cloud of radioactive particles swept across Europe. By 1987 civil nuclear power had become a party political issue. A number of mainly American studies were produced in the wake of Chernobyl. They attempted to evaluate media performance in the communication of risks compared to the coverage of other disasters, such as Three Mile Island and Bhopal (Beck, 1987; Friedman, Gorney and Egolf, 1987; Gale, 1987; Rubin, 1987; Wilkins and Patterson, 1987; Guizzardi, 1988; Norstedt, 1988 and Warren, 1990). In Chapter 3 it was noted that much of the research into the media coverage of Chernobyl has been atheoretical, it has treated the media in an undifferentiated manner and it tends to assume direct audience effects. Also, it was suggested that little attention has been paid to the question of the extent to which sources employ strategic means to attain media coverage and the factors which determine their success or failure. However, although these studies tend to be methodologically and theoretically unsophisticated, they suggest that the communication of information about risks has not generally improved since Three Mile Island. They claim that a major information crisis occurred because a small elite of leaders controlled knowledge about the effects of radiation, and the Western media were often left to speculate because Eastern Bloc sources were so secretive. Studies of the reporting of the Chernobyl disaster found that national media tended to offer more reassurances, while local media tended to be more non-reassuring and critical of the whole handling of the incident.

During the mid 1980s the nuclear industry was increasingly accused of being closed and secretive, not only in the Eastern Bloc but throughout Europe. The mounting lack of confidence in nuclear power in the UK led members of the nuclear industry to become



concerned about their image. According to Tim Dwelly: "On a national level, the PR staff feared the media itself was turning against nuclear power" ('Chernobyl Fallout Sparked a PR Crisis', The Guardian, 1st Jan. 1989, p.2). The Director of the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) stated:

"The Sizewell Inquiry, the selection of the possible sites for the disposal of solid radioactive wastes, the rediscovery of geographical clusters of cancer, the Chernobyl accident, and finally, the publication of advice about radon and its daughters in our homes have all provided headlines. The gap between the professional in radiation protection and the public seems to have widened - a trend I believe to be worrying." ('The Work of the National Radiological Protection Board 1984/86', 1987:9)

One way in which British Nuclear Fuels attempted to bridge this gap was to change Windscale's public image through renaming the plant 'Sellafield' and embarking upon a major public relations campaign. Douglas observes:

"The historical and scientific background to nuclear power was explained in an exhibition, and 'Sellafield' sightseer coaches were laid on to show people round the sight. Journalists and television crews were among the first to avail themselves of the open-door policy, producing articles and news coverage that BNFL describes as £2 million of free advertising." ('Selling Sellafield as Open and Honest', Torin Douglas, The Independent, 24th May, 1989, p.17)

Indeed, Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN, maintained that BNFL's open-door policy has enjoyed considerable success:

"... that's not the same as BNFL ten years ago when they would have wanted to know very strictly where we were going to film and wouldn't have let us go anywhere else. I mean there's still scope that they might be less than frank. I mean I'm not saying that they're showing you all the nasty things but on the other hand you couldn't prove that whereas before all I needed to do was to stand outside the gate with the camera and say we put these questions to BNFL and they won't let us in to film and everyone would have thought oh God what are they hiding? But you can't say that now and that's a very clever piece of strategic PR on their part." (17th Jan. 1990, pp. 26-27)

However the BBC's Environment Correspondent, Ian Breach, suggested that although BNFL spend seven million pounds a year on public relations, the standard of their PR is low. He related how one of the PR officials at BNFL mistakenly sent a letter, asking

for a pre-transmission viewing of a programme about nuclear reprocessing, to the magazine 'Private Eye', instead of the television programme, 'Public Eye':

"...British Nuclear Fuels mounts one of the most expensive and comprehensive public relations efforts of any institution in the country. They've got an endless stream of PRs, you know, there are more and more of them crop up out of the woodwork every time you deal with the company and they're uniformly useless... last week I had a call from one of their PRs and he said I wondered why the producer I was working with hadn't returned my call... And I said when did he send the letter? He said, ah, we sent it on Friday. Oh, wait a minute, no, we sent it on Monday. And then he put down the phone and he came back and said oh my secretary said it was sent to 'Private Eye', not 'Public Eye' the BBC programme. She'd sent it to 'Private Eye' the magazine. That's the standard of their PR!" (27th Nov. 1990, 12-13)

The CEGB, like BNFL, has also reassessed its public image since the accident at Chernobyl. The board drew up a document entitled, 'Fall-out from Chernobyl: A PR Strategy for a Nuclear Future', and concern was expressed about unfavourable media coverage. Olive Van de Worp, public relations officer for the CEGB, claimed:

"I believe the board attaches a great deal of importance to public relations obviously since an event like Chernobyl that's heightened public awareness of nuclear power and probably since then we have been even more anxious and concerned to... really to run an open information policy to the public." (6 Jan 1989, p.3)

One of the ways in which the former CEGB has sought to provide a more open approach in recent years is through sending newsletters from various nuclear power stations to the media, so that if a small incident occurs this is directly reported to the media in fairly short, simple, terms. Tim Jones, reporter for The Bristol Evening Post, claimed that there was a distinct turnabout in the attitude of the former CEGB after Chernobyl:

"... before that, when we'd rung up these press officers we were quite often telling them for the first time about something which had happened at the power station, albeit what we considered newsworthy. After Chernobyl they certainly tended to know nine times out of ten about the incidents before we did, and in fact would quite often tell us about them before we heard about them, perhaps from other sources, and rang them up... And I think their press offices used to have quite a sticky time getting information out and what Chernobyl did was really to blow that apart and to make the whole thing much more open and to make management, if you like, much more aware of their public image." (11th Nov. 1988, pp. 3-4)

The nuclear industry, then, has taken a number of measures in recent years to reassure the public and the media about the safety of nuclear power. However, previous studies suggest that the local press tend to offer negative evaluations of nuclear power (for example, see Spears et al. 1987). Journalists on regional newspapers are generally closer to the grassroots activities of local people than national journalists and they play an important role in mediating local attitudes towards nuclear power. This study, therefore, focuses upon how a key local newspaper, The Bristol Evening Post, covered the Hinkley Inquiry. In particular, it focuses upon the relationship between sources and journalists. As Spears et al. argue:

"Given the widening gulf between policymakers on the one hand, and the public and the local press on the other, it seems important to distinguish between different 'sources' of evaluative coverage of nuclear power." (1987:31)

However, before local press coverage of the Hinkley Inquiry is discussed we need to consider the nature of the public inquiry system and its peculiar legal discourse.

## **(ii) The Public Inquiry System**

The public inquiry is a central part of the British decision-making apparatus. It is in some ways very similar to the American system but different policy issues tend to be dealt with separately. In other countries such as Sweden and Austria national referenda are held instead of public inquiries. O'Riordan et al. define the public inquiry as:

"... a legally impregnated advisory mechanism for providing a recommendation, independently arrived at, for ministers to consider alongside various political matters of material significance which are not normally examinable in the inquiry proper." (O'Riordan et al., 1985:72)

A public inquiry is a ceremonial ritual conducted in a judicial framework and, to some extent, serves to contain social conflict (cf. Wynne, 1982a). Indeed, Wynne (1982a) notes that the Windscale Inquiry (1977), into BNFL's application to build a thermal oxide reprocessing plant in Cumbria, channelled potential conflict into a drawn-out debate which drained objectors' energies and resources:

"On the face of it, it marked a radical shift to more democratic nuclear decision-making. Although ostensibly a factual investigation of a specific local plan, organized within a modest tradition of administrative investigation, the Inquiry was the key part of a major exercise in the resolution of social conflict. A year earlier, when the clamour to hold an inquiry was threatening to break into a less civilised activity, tens of thousands of demonstrators had stormed riot police at a nuclear site in Brokdorf, Germany... In a few years the nuclear issue had moved beyond the capacity of traditional decision-making processes. All sides invested it with passion and symbolism rooted in the basics of industrial society.... It was an extraordinary event in the political process and created interest in an increasingly insecure international nuclear world as a possible exemplar in conflict containment." (Wynne, 1982a:7)

As Wynne (1982a) argues, the greater the distance between reality and belief, the more ritual is necessary. Rituals serve to focus attention away from anomalies of experience and belief. Nuclear energy issues involve increasingly complex choices and rituals provide individuals with a sense of purpose and control over their lives, particularly in situations where they feel powerless. Indeed, rituals cultivate a shared acceptance of the framework of the proceedings as democratic and 'natural':

"... political 'consensus' is achieved by actively cultivating their lack of interest, for example, by ritual processes and utterances (i.e. symbolic actions) which affirm the objectivity, and trustworthiness of key institutions, or which 'instil' cognitions that define issues as ones for expert analysis not social choice." (Wynne, 1982a:161)

Public inquiries follow strict rules of procedure and take place in a 'courtroom' setting with a 'judge', who hears the 'evidence', and 'cross-examination' of the applicants and the objectors' 'witnesses'. The judicial discourse assumes that 'objective' empirical fact can be established and it appeals to notions of rationality and reasonable behaviour (cf. Wynne, 1982a). The Inquiry Inspector is the central symbol of impartiality and objectivity; at the Hinkley 'C' Inquiry Michael Barnes, Queen's Counsel, took on this role. As Wynne observes:

"... a judicial approach defines issues as one-dimensional, fragmenting them into piecemeal questions formulated in precise terms. This demand for precision may do violence to reality, especially where conflict exists over the meaning of a case. Broad perspectives, including historical, sociological or ethical argument, are destroyed by this distillation." (1982a:121)

The public inquiry process, then, is unique in the adversarial stance it takes to the debate about nuclear energy issues. Each 'case' is weighed by the evidence and the local press form the medium through which the different 'cases' are presented to those living in the vicinity of Hinkley Point. Very complex arguments become simplified into particular ways of talking about the issues. Thus, the ability to translate highly technical arguments into layperson's language becomes crucial. And the extent to which concepts become simplified depends, to some extent, upon the profile of the newspaper as we shall see in the next section.

### **iii) The Hinkley 'C' Inquiry: National Newspaper Coverage**

Previous public inquiries into nuclear plants have attracted relatively little national newspaper coverage. Ian Breach (1978) noted of the Windscale Inquiry: "... daily and weekly coverage of the hearings appeared in The Guardian and the 'New Scientist'; discontinuous coverage was given by The Times, Financial Times, and the radio and television networks." (1978:108). The Sizewell 'B' Inquiry received a relatively large amount of coverage in the national press because it was the first PWR of its kind to be built in this country. Indeed, a number of interviewees suggested that the Hinkley 'C' Inquiry attracted less national newspaper coverage than had the Sizewell 'B' inquiry because many of the issues had been discussed before and they were no longer so newsworthy. For example, Jan McHarry, senior information officer at Friends of the Earth, commented:

"The Inquiry has been covered but I think people are becoming very jaded with public inquiries. Certainly not as high profile as the Sizewell Inquiry. I mean it's due to finish in September and there's quite a few weeks to go by and the country wouldn't actually think that we're just on the verge of what could be, if that part went ahead, of massive nuclear expansion... So it has been very sort of low profile really apart from where issues grab attention, you know, leukemia clusters, those sort of things. But low key is definitely the theme of the day." (17th July 1989, pp. 15-16)

Olive Van de Worp, public relations officer for the CEBG concurred:

"There hasn't been a great deal... it isn't to the nationals as interesting as the Sizewell Inquiry because that was the first PWR. Here we're looking at, you know, number two designs. So a lot of the issues and a lot of the matters raised at the Sizewell Inquiry, as the first, obviously grabbed the national headlines. I think where the nationals are interested is in the possible effects

and implications of the privatisation of the industry because that is a new issue that has been thrown into the arena..." (6th Jan. 1989, p.10)

Also, journalist Roger Milne, who covered the Inquiry for The Guardian suggested that public inquiries fail to interest news editors because of their technical complexity, and because they often involve small, little-known, objecting groups. He claimed:

"Covering big public inquiries is a bit like punching blancmange. It's not that the issues themselves are insubstantial, but getting what us journalists consider 'a firm handle' on the proceedings can be extremely difficult, persuading a news desk to take the resulting copy, even harder. If you found some of the Inquiry hard going so did the hacks! The topics under scrutiny are wide-ranging, complex and not necessarily clear cut! This also explains why much of the hearing failed to make it on to the front pages - or even the bottom of the last column of the earliest news pages... One of the features of the hearing was the involvement of so many individuals and small groups... There is a downside, unfortunately. In terms of media coverage the fact that you are not representing one of the large and well-known groups means news editors aren't interested!" ('Hinkley Postscript', The Hinkley Inquirer, No 21, Sept. 1989, p.9)

The Hinkley Inquiry was covered, in the main, by three national newspapers: Roger Milne (freelance, Science Correspondent at 'The New Scientist') for The Guardian; David Green (freelance, from The East Anglian Times) for The Financial Times and Tom Wilkie The Independent's Science Editor. Roger Milne and David Green had been freelance reporters for the Sizewell 'B' Inquiry too. The Guardian provided the most frequent coverage of the Inquiry. It carried a brief report on the proceedings each Monday. Indeed, The Guardian has a high level of general coverage concerning nuclear issues (cf. Warren, 1990). In general, though, the national quality newspapers only reported on the Inquiry when key issues about privatisation were raised or when a newsworthy report was released. A heavyweight paper such as The Financial Times could afford to devote a reasonable amount of space to the discussion of the economic and business issues involved, given the fact that the electricity industry was being privatised, and that its readership is largely middle-class and from the business sector. John Hunt, Environment Correspondent for The Financial Times, maintained:

"... one of the central issues has been the way the CEGB have changed the whole thrust of their argument. I mean at the Sizewell 'B' Inquiry the whole argument was, which they presented with great aplomb, as if it was

incontrovertable that nuclear power was the cheap economic option... But now they've entirely dropped that and tried to refuse to argue that at all at the current Inquiry. They merely said it was to do with diversification, you had to have the different sources of power. And this is largely to do with the coming privatisation, you know. They jolly well know their evidence won't stand up, particularly while evidence has come out since Sizewell to prove it isn't economical, particularly as there's been a drop in world commodity prices and oil and that sort of thing has come down in comparative terms from its height." (24th Jan. 1989, p. 27)

Indeed, a study by Roberts (1991) found that representatives of the main objecting groups to Hinkley 'C' believed that The Financial Times covered the economic aspects of the Inquiry most fully. The majority of the other newspapers did not view it as an important national story, and local environmental groups did not communicate with the wider financial community in London. Roberts claims:

"There was a widespread belief among local groups that the financial community was paying heed to Inquiry evidence on the economics of nuclear power. That the Financial Times was covering the Inquiry more fully than most other papers was most often quoted in support of this contention. However no local group took positive steps to facilitate the dissemination of information to the City. Given the available financial and personnel resources, the only group who had the potential to do this were SHE, due to its large funding and potential national contacts through Greenpeace, but it firmly saw this as a task for the national, London-based groups." (1991:60)

Whilst there was some coverage of the Hinkley 'C' Inquiry in the broadsheets, the popular press carried very little coverage. Tim Jones, a reporter who covered the Hinkley Inquiry for The Bristol Evening Post, claimed that national press coverage was irregular because the issues had already been raised before:

"Well, it's been a bit sporadic to say the least... Whenever you get an incident or an accident at a nuclear power station nuclear power suddenly comes sort of to the forefront of the news again and you'll find that the national press for a few days will show more interest in the Inquiry. But the only ones that have really been carrying regular reports are, I think, The Guardian, The Financial Times and I think The Independent, to a certain extent... a lot of the arguments are the same arguments, I mean from both sides. To get the nationals involved it's got to be something a bit out of the ordinary." (11th Nov. 1988, p.9)

Indeed, Warren (1990) concluded from her content analysis of The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Daily Mirror and The Sun that:

"The only nuclear story in the period well-covered by the 'quality' papers and not mentioned by the tabloids was the extended inquiry into whether another nuclear reactor should be built at Hinkley Point. It was ignored presumably because it was a long running serious story with no 'sexiness' or personalisation to it." (1990:15)

Eve Kerswill, press officer for the Consortium of Opposing Local Authorities, claimed that the coverage of the Inquiry by the tabloids was "very poor" (4th Jan. 1989, p.3). Indeed, in the past there has been a general reluctance among many of the popular press to cover nuclear stories. An Environment Correspondent for a middle market newspaper claimed that the paper has devoted little coverage to nuclear issues in general because the area is so complicated and politically controversial, and because of the need to sell newspapers. When questioned as to why there was little coverage of the Inquiry in the tabloids, David Jones, former Environment Editor of Today, responded:

"It's dry, it's dull... It's dull, we don't cover public inquiries very much." (3rd Nov. 1989, pp.21-22)

Although there was generally very little mention of the Inquiry in the tabloids there was a lot of media interest when Arthur Scargill appeared with Tony Benn at the Inquiry. The popular press, then, do not tend to devote much space to such inquiries because they do not fulfil news values such as novelty, scandal, personalisation or political intrigue.

#### **iv) Local Press Coverage of the Hinkley 'C' Inquiry: Critical Evaluations**

The local press play a vital role in sustaining interest in environmental debates which have a local and a national dimension. Burgess (1991) surveyed 254 households in the Rainham area of Essex and found that a majority of 61% found out about plans to turn Rainham Marshes into a theme park from the local press. She notes:

"... what is remarkable, given the speed with which national daily papers drop stories, is the persistency shown by the local paper, in reporting news and opinions about the plans for the marshes." (1991:10)



In 1987 there were more than 1,000 paid-for local or regional newspapers with a total readership of 55 million, together with over 700 free weekly papers (White, 1987). Regional newspapers often follow up stories which are printed in the nationals. Local reporters generally have more time to investigate such items and are under greater pressure to take up more space. Tim Jones, a reporter who covered the Hinkley Inquiry for The Bristol Evening Post, suggested:

"Apart from anything else there is more pressure on us, if you like, to fill more space. Whereas your national reporter is doing one story a day probably, we've got to do, well I would say hopefully that we do several. And perhaps we've got more time and we're more at the grassroots." (11th Nov. 1988, p.5)

For example, whilst the coverage of a welding incident at Hinkley 'B' was a one-off story for The Guardian it was a developing story in local papers such as The Bristol Evening Post. A local councillor, Bob Brookes, claimed that while he worked on the construction of the Hinkley 'B' station he was asked to cover up a faulty weld. Tim Jones maintained:

"... whereas they have only one bite of the story, it was an on-going story for us for several weeks and in fact it's just cropped up again." (11th Nov. 1988, p.4)

There was a high level of coverage of the Inquiry by The Bristol Evening Post which had a circulation of over 120,000 in 1988. The content analysis of The Bristol Evening Post coded 179 items which made reference to the Inquiry and their average length was 47 standard column centimetres. Not suprisingly, the highest number of items were at the beginning and towards the conclusion of the Inquiry (see Table 23 overleaf). Some of the fluctuations reflect the fact that the Inquiry was adjourned several times.



The majority (117) of the 179 items coded were written by a named reporter. Most of these were written by Tim Jones or Ray Stokes. Of the other items coded, 40 were written by an unnamed reporter, 12 were readers' letters, 3 were 'other' sources and four could not be coded. Only two items were written by a representative of an environmental group and only one item was written by a named columnist.

Of those items which took a clear line, more than half were judged to be non-reassuring about nuclear energy: 52 were coded non-reassuring and 17 were coded reassuring. However, 110 items did not clearly fall into either category. Up to four main themes could be coded for each item. Table 25 (overleaf) indicates that the highest number of themes were related to inquiry procedures, accidents at nuclear power stations, the viability of alternative forms of energy, nuclear energy as an uneconomic source of power and the inadequate safety of nuclear power stations. The category 'inquiry procedures/length' refers to themes relating to the drawn-out length of the Inquiry, and items informing readers when the Inquiry was temporarily adjourned. Because each item concerning the Hinkley Point Inquiry was coded, the category 'other main themes', included a range of diverse topics which did not fit into the coding frame. For example, some items merely stated that another proof of evidence was about to be discussed.

**Table 25**

**Themes Presented in The Bristol Evening Post's  
Coverage of the Hinkley Inquiry**

Inquiry procedures/length	56
Other main themes	54
Accidents at nuclear power stations	33
Viability of alternative forms of energy	27
Nuclear power uneconomic/increased costs	27
Inadequate safety of nuclear power stations	26
Activities of environmental groups	18
Global warming	17
Privatisation	16
Detrimental effects on the local community	15
Safety of nuclear power	14
Leukemia clusters	11
Nuclear waste	10
Unequal resources of the groups involved/Inquiry undemocratic	10
Public opinion largely against nuclear power	10
Environmental advantages of nuclear power	9
Financial advantages of nuclear power	8
Beneficial effects on the local community	8
Transportation of nuclear fuel/waste	4
Decommissioning of nuclear power stations	4
PR activities of the CEGB	2
Cannot code/ not clear	1

Reports tended to focus upon the detrimental effects upon the local community rather than the benefits for local people. Editorials were generally sympathetic towards the major objectors to the construction of Hinkley 'C'. For example, an editorial at the start of the Inquiry tied in the comments of Prince Aga Khan about global environmental issues with the Hinkley Inquiry, in a call for such threats to be taken seriously:

"A serious warning about what man is doing to his own planet was given in Bristol today. Just as the public inquiry opened into whether a third nuclear power station should be built at Hinkley Point... Prince Sadruddin's prophet-like warnings must be taken seriously if current sins are not to be visited ever more savagely on future generations. So-called natural disasters,

he says, are increasingly man-made. And he never even mentioned Chernobyl." (The Bristol Evening Post, 5th October 1988, p.6)

A year later when John Wakeham announced the U-turn in Government policy concerning nuclear power this was a front page lead for The Bristol Evening Post. The following day its editorial ran:

"As her government's energy policy lies in tatters, Mrs Thatcher would do well to remember one of her own favourite pieces of wisdom: you cannot buck the markets... The anti-Hinkley protesters are well entitled to their celebrations today but they must know that the power of hard cash, not environmental considerations, won the day... some of the immense sums due to be spent on nuclear power must now go into conservation, energy efficiency and research. It is time imagination replaced ideology." (10th November, 1989, p.6)

Two special page-length reports by Crispin Aubrey, joint co-ordinator of Stop Hinkley Expansion were printed by The Bristol Evening Post on the 18th and 19th July 1989. These reports, from the Inquiry's session at Chernobyl, suggested that the effects of the disaster were widespread and that the Soviets are overwhelmingly against nuclear power.

In addition to the predominance of anti-nuclear themes, the content analysis also found that the major objectors to the construction of Hinkley 'C' were most frequently cited as sources (see Table 26 overleaf).

Representatives of an opposing environmental group	61
Representatives of the CEGB/National Power	56
Representatives of COLA	26
Vox pops	15
Inquiry Inspector	14
Local councillors	11
Other local government officials	11
Lord Silsoe, the CEGB's QC	9
Other representatives of the nuclear industry	7
Independent witnesses/objectors	6
Secretary or Under-Secretary for Energy	6
Not clear/cannot code	5

Again, up to four major, prominent, sources could be coded for each item. While representatives of environmental groups were used as major sources 61 times and COLA were cited 26 times, representatives of the CEGB/National Power were only mentioned 56 times as prominent sources. Indeed, representatives of environmental groups were cited considerably more frequently than was government. Government sources were overwhelmingly from local government; local councillors and other local government officials were each cited 11 times, while the Secretary or Under-Secretary for Energy was used as a major source only 6 times.

Earlier chapters suggested that Hall et al.'s theory of 'primary definers' suffers from a number of oversights. These findings suggest another problem with Hall et al.'s (1978) theory is that it generalises about the media, without recognising that access to national and local media may considerably differ. Indeed, Spears et al. (1987) found that a negative evaluation of nuclear energy dominated local press coverage in the UK. The authors' sampling frame included all items which made reference to nuclear energy or alternative forms of energy in all the local, daily, British newspapers during the first six months of 1981. Spears et al. found that the general public and environmental groups provided the most critical assessments of nuclear power. Not surprisingly, pro-nuclear industry and organisations



<b><u>Table 27</u></b>	
<b><u>The Subject of Illustrative and Photographic Content about the Hinkley C Inquiry</u></b>	
<b><u>Subject</u></b>	<b><u>No. of Items</u></b>
Opposing environmental group	11
Nuclear power station	11
An MP	5
'Other' subjects	5
A local government official	2
Independent witnesses	2
Inquiry Inspector	1
Representative of the CEGB	1
Alternative forms of energy	1
TU representative	1
Not clear/cannot code	1

Much of the illustrative content, then, featured representatives of environmental groups. The objectors wisely decided to limit the use of stunts to the beginning and towards the end of the Inquiry when they calculated that the media would respond. Indeed, they attracted considerable interest from the provincial press and photographs of the staged protests, involving the parading and mock burial of a symbolic white elephant and performances by mime artists, were included alongside reports (see Figure 2 overleaf).





could decipher them they wouldn't. Well, I wouldn't say we couldn't decipher them, obviously we can, but they wouldn't make interesting reading and when you've got transcripts of 120, on average, pages a day coming out of the Inquiry, if you start going into the scientific stuff you just couldn't do it. You wouldn't have the time, or more importantly, the space to report it." (11th Nov. 1989, p.7)

The way in which scientific arguments were presented and the impartiality of local reporting was a major issue raised by many of the interviewees. The next section discusses their views about the fairness of local and national press coverage of the Inquiry.

v) **Fairness in the National and Local Press: the views of the CEGB and the objectors**

In general the non-governmental organisations claimed that they were reasonably satisfied with the quality of the nationals' coverage of the inquiry. However Roger Milne, Environment Consultant for the 'New Scientist' and freelance reporter on The Guardian, claimed that his stories for The Guardian were cut to two-thirds of their original length. This led the CEGB to complain about the way in which the newspaper had covered their case. Many of the interviewees commented that the level of coverage in the popular newspapers was poor. Both the CEGB and the opposing groups complained of unfair treatment by the local press.

For example Olive Van de Worp, press officer for the CEGB claimed that the Board were at put at a disadvantage: whilst the CEGB was largely alone in representing the case for Hinkley 'C', there were several opposing groups who, collectively, attracted more space in the local press. Olive Van de Worp argued:

"I think that we've received some pretty fair coverage, lately, in terms of putting our case across. And where possible we've also identified opportunities to come back on opposition statements or to restate our own policies. I think one of the problems with coverage of an issue like this is that whilst the CEGB is a large organisation and is the applicant for the case, nevertheless we are one, if you like, corporate voice speaking. When we look at the opposition there are a number of different organisations involved... So, you know, there is a danger of there looking to be somewhat a balance in papers for the opposition. Certainly in terms of the fact that there are more voices with various opinions and of course the journalists are anxious to put

across all those opinions whereas we possibly only get one crack of the whip in some ways. And I think that's something that we're constantly in a way fighting against to try and get a come back as one voice amongst many." (6th Jan. 1989, p. 6)

Olive Van de Worp went on to suggest that another problem, which the CEGB share with the opposing groups, is that there was often little time to make an immediate response that was accurate and clear:

"... I think there's almost a timescale problem too, with regard to that, in that we would want to put out a statement that we felt was absolutely correct and not misleading in any way. Sometimes that doesn't always work in the timescale required by the media." (6th Jan. 1989, p.7)

Olive Van de Worp claimed a further problem is that the local press tend to like human interest stories or emotive statements, while the CEGB tries to create an image based around being seen to be objective and factual:

" I think another problem is that in the press you normally have the fairly ardent opponents of nuclear power talking at a fair amount of length. There are supporters of nuclear power as well but, as you know, they tend to be a fairly silent group...I think locally one tends to be somewhat blinded by press statements into believing that absolutely everyone is against nuclear power. As I say they are the people that stand up and shout and their emotive arguments do tend to make people believe that actually everybody is against us." (6th Jan. 1989, p. 9)

However, the CEGB have much more power and influence than all the objecting organisations and individuals put together. Indeed, Mike Birkin, a campaigner for Bristol Friends of the Earth, claimed that Richard Cottrell, Bristol Conservative Euro MP and a vocal supporter of the CEGB's case, was able to exert his influence upon top level media personnel when he appeared at the Inquiry in October 1988. His evidence was clearly aligned to the current government thinking on the matter. And Mike Birkin, who cross examined Richard Cottrell, maintained that the resulting local media coverage was unfair. A prominent article, 'N-power is way to stop West drowning', written by the paper's Political Editor, Michael Lord, suggested that nuclear power was the answer to global warming. A map detailing the areas that would be affected by the forecast flooding was included alongside the

report. No space was given to the views of objectors to the CEGB's case. Mike Birkin maintained:

"... although we tried hard to get our side of things in the media, we didn't get anything like equal coverage and Richard Cottrell got a long bit on both evening broadcasts. And we got kind of one sentence in one of them. And we didn't get anything in The Evening Post. Richard Cottrell got sort of half a page, big, prominent. I think we might have got one line but they didn't actually use any of the quotes from the press release that I sent... although the actual reporters and people that I spoke to and news editors, the people that I spoke to were more sympathetic towards us and they didn't like Richard Cottrell at all and they were actually complaining about being sent out to cover this ridiculous man talking nonsense and they were quite pleased that we were there to make it interesting. So we very much got the impression from the people we dealt with that, you know, they were biased towards us but what actually appeared in the media was very much biased towards Richard Cottrell. And he's, you know, a very influential person and he knows people at a level that we don't have access to at all, the people who really pull the strings. So that was quite instructive to realise the limitations on our part and our access to the media and to realise that having people that we think of as being important... is undoubtedly important but it's still not everything." (5th Jan. 1989, p.4)

Tim Jones of The Bristol Evening Post suggested Friends of the Earth may have received better media coverage if they had sent a press release to all the national and the local newspapers, and to television and radio stations, at the start of that day:

"... Cottrell is an ex-journalist and obviously was able to orchestrate his appearance quite well via London, in actual fact, where most of the news desks up there were aware of the fact that he was appearing and also that he would be producing these maps... Friends of the Earth put out their own press release which we gave coverage of. Again they could have been a little more forceful in what they did. I only saw one copy of the press release knocking about. They really should have had that circulated to newspapers etc., television and the press, that morning." (11th Nov. 1988, p.9)

However, a report in The Western Gazette, a weekly regional newspaper, (11th November 1988) gave a reasonable amount of space to both Cottrell's arguments and to the objectors' claims. In contrast to the article in The Bristol Evening Post, it ran: 'Nuclear Power or Somerset Sinks - Claim'.

Additionally, Richard Cottrell was the author of an article about the greenhouse effect and Hinkley 'C' which was printed by The Bristol Evening Post on the 9th November 1988. Nicola Ramsden, Friends of the Earth regional campaigner, responded by writing a letter to the newspaper. A reasonable amount of space was given to readers' letters objecting to Cottrell's assertions on 15th November 1988. And The Western Daily Press carried an article, 'Doomwatch flood threat to West' on the 17th November 1988, which reported on Cottrell's fears about the greenhouse effect.

**vi) Power, Resources and Credibility**

Questions of influence, credibility and resources are central to an understanding of the differing levels of access to the media as experienced by the objectors and the proposers of Hinkley 'C'. From the start of the Inquiry the CEGB developed a highly sophisticated public relations strategy to put across its case. The CEGB could afford to employ many more full-time staff to work on the Inquiry than could either of the two major opposing groups, the Consortium of Opposing Local Authorities and Stop Hinkley Expansion. The year of the Inquiry was the first time the CEGB did not include the accounts for publicity in their annual report. However, in 1987 the board spent about £1,000,000 on publicity. It is estimated that the CEGB employed about sixty people to work on the Hinkley 'C' Inquiry. This included the following staff: an Inquiry team; a consent team (CEGB staff preparing the environmental statement for the Board's application); a team of barristers; clerical and administrative employees at the Press Office; the Information Officer at the Hinkley 'C' Information Centre and his clerical backup; and the Press Officer who was from time to time supported by press officers from the CEGB headquarters and by the public relations manager at Bristol.

In comparison Stop Hinkley Expansion and the Consortium of Opposing Local Authorities had considerably less resources. The Consortium spent £500,000 on the Inquiry, Stop Hinkley Expansion spent around £10,000, while Greenpeace is estimated to have spent more than £100,000 on the Inquiry (cf. Roberts, 1991). However, as Roberts notes, opposing groups have invested a relatively large amount of resources, in terms of their overall campaign budgets, at nuclear public inquiries. She observes:

"A striking feature of major UK Public Inquiries is the high level of resources devoted to them by objecting groups. This is superficially surprising, given the

low expectations with which such groups approach these Inquiries." (Roberts, 1991:45)

Roberts (1991) goes on to suggest that one of the reasons may be that, to some extent, objectors were taken in by the ideology of participation in the Inquiry and of succeeding in presenting their case. Roberts concluded from her interviews with the major objectors to Hinkley 'C':

"...group representatives were to some extent seduced by the process of participation into the acceptance of the Inquiry... Given the effectiveness of delay as a tactic groups may have participated in a spirit of attrition, knowing the difficulties of the PWR programme were growing greater with, and exacerbated by delay... What emerges is a complex and contradictory web of motivations. None expected to 'win' the Inquiry in the simple sense of preventing consent. Clarity prevailed to this extent. However, claiming their campaigning sights were set on targets external to the Inquiry, some groups prejudiced these objectives by their commitment of money and human resources to the internal Inquiry process, suggesting ambivalence and a degree of confusion." (1991:63-64)

Although Stop Hinkley Expansion operated on a much lower budget than the CEGB, and there were only four full-time workers in their office, they were successful in attracting sympathetic press coverage from many of the regional newspapers. The Stop Hinkley Expansion Centre was partially financed by a £50,000 donation from Greenpeace. Also, Stop Hinkley Expansion considerably benefited from the experience gained by associated groups of taking part at the Sizewell 'B' Inquiry. Additionally, Stop Hinkley Expansion co-ordinator Crispin Aubrey, a former journalist, provided valuable publicity skills. Indeed, Bristol Evening Post reporter, Tim Jones, claimed:

"We've got a very good relationship with Stop Hinkley Expansion... partly due to the fact that... Crispin Aubrey is a journalist so basically he knows what the ball game is all about." (11th Nov. 1988, p.5)

Stop Hinkley Expansion developed close links with journalists who covered the Inquiry through regularly informing them about the proceedings through telephone conversations, briefs of evidence and press releases. On average, about one press release a week was sent to the national quality and popular press, as well as to the regional newspapers. Stop Hinkley Expansion displayed a keen awareness of journalistic news values.

For example, the group sent out a press release to the local press in October 1988 to inform them that a fourteen year old boy was going to speak at the Inquiry. With its human interest angle the story made good copy and appeared in The Western Daily Press and The Bristol Evening Post. Tim Jones of The Bristol Evening Post, recalled:

"Obviously if we know in advance as well that something is going to happen out there, that helps and this again is where Stop Hinkley Expansion scores with the fourteen year old school boy come and give evidence, for the fact they'd told certain people he was there... really on a long running Inquiry like this, where it's at times so difficult for us to pick out the meat of something simply because of time, you know, things like that are vital." (11th Nov. 1988, p. 6)

However, it was not until some three months had passed that the Consortium of Opposing Local Authorities, which had never been involved in a nuclear public inquiry before, recognised the necessity of employing their own press officer. COLA lacked both the experience and the resources to mount a sophisticated PR strategy on a par with the CEGB. However, the Consortium spent around £500,000 on the Inquiry and employed fourteen full-time staff. At the start of the Inquiry County Councillor, Humphrey Temperley, thought that he could deal with the press on his own, aided occasionally by a public relations consultant. However as time went on, and journalists increasingly complained about not receiving any briefs of evidence from the Consortium, it became clear that COLA needed to employ a press officer. Indeed, there was very little early coverage of COLA's case by the local and national press. So three months after the Inquiry was opened an experienced journalist, Eve Kerswill, was appointed as a part-time press officer. Eve Kerswill explained:

"Well the chairman, who's County Councillor, used to just answer press enquiries himself and the view was that if people wanted the proofs of evidence they would actually come and get the proofs of evidence and read through them themselves and find stories themselves but it is quite difficult to do that and obviously you want to put forward your own point of view. If you can help the press by sending out press releases then you've got a much better chance of getting that view across... So we're helping them out really and hopefully getting a bit more publicity, getting in a few more bulletins than perhaps we would have done otherwise and obviously the local press is important as well. But my job really is to get the message across to the nationals and particularly the tabloids, who've not touched it at all really, they've done very little. (4th Jan. 1989, p.1)

Indeed, Tim Jones of The Bristol Evening Post, maintained:

"...they've been presenting a lot of evidence over the last weeks and from a press point of view it's been an absolute disaster, despite all the money they've spent and the fact that the county councillors have got their own press office, nobody has thought to do briefs of the evidence. So we've been presented with enormous great documents when we go out there, most of which we haven't got the time to read, nor listen to the evidence and unfortunately they've rather missed the boat." (11th Nov. 1988, p.5)

CEGB Press Officer, Olive Van de Worp, concurred:

"... whereas we tried to sort of in the early stages put out a lot of information to the press and guide them in terms of press releases and summaries and briefings I think that's, in the early stages, where COLA actually failed in that they didn't actually put out simple press statements. And the press, I think, got a bit lost and were saying there are all these groups, what do we do with them? And they were almost coming to me to ask me what they should do with COLA's case..." (6th Jan. 1989, p.28)

Some objecting groups, such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England, developed a parliamentary strategy and used Inquiry documents to brief MPs with a view to influencing the Electricity Privatisation Bill (cf. Roberts, 1991). In general the national opposing environmental groups did not target the public; they targeted policymakers and the financial community. As Roberts argues: "The Inquiry was not viewed as a populist issue by national groups, except Greenpeace. Parliament and the City were their targets." (1991:59)

In contrast, the CEGB were able to mount an extensive national PR strategy aimed at the general public and the media. The CEGB mounted a series of national advertising campaigns and took journalists on tours of nuclear power stations. Tim Jones, reporter for The Bristol Evening Post, explained:

"I've met quite a few of the CEGB expert witnesses that have been called so far, people like Sam Goddard, Brian George, basically through trips which have been organised by the CEGB to other nuclear power stations... They've been essential, to my mind, and also to give us a much better working relationship, if you like, with these so-called experts... that if we need to go to these people for quotes or information or explanations they do know who they're talking to. I mean it's been useful." (11th Nov. 1988, pp.6-7)



Also, the CEGB produced a press release at the start of each particular proof of evidence, in addition to a number of more informal briefings which were made to journalists as the need arose, such as response statements. These statements were checked over so that if the press required an immediate response from the board on a particular topic, they could be made immediately available. Additionally, the CEGB were sufficiently well resourced to be able to carry out extensive monitoring of newspaper, radio and television coverage of the Inquiry. The CEGB took press clippings from all the national daily papers and from the principal regional newspapers. They subscribed to a telex monitoring service which provided them with typed transcripts of all television and radio output concerning the inquiry. In addition to this, the CEGB videoed general media coverage of matters relating to the nuclear industry. Not only was media coverage extensively monitored but it was part of press officer Olive Van de Worp's job to analyse and respond to it. She maintained:

"We would read it to see how the coverage is going but we would also read it to see if there are any particular points that we might want to pick up or respond to, or refute, or disagree with. And also, of course, to see how our own people we've put up for interview ourselves, how their interviews have gone and how they've been used. So I mean that's quite a sort of substantial task to keep that going as well." (6th Jan. 1989, p.21)

Unlike the CEGB, SHE did not possess the resources to subscribe to a monitoring service, but they carried out their own monitoring of coverage of the Inquiry in The Times, The Guardian, The Independent and The Financial Times. Locally they monitored coverage in The Bristol Evening Post, The Western Daily Press and The Bridgwater Evening News. All television coverage on the first day of the Inquiry was videoed but in general monitoring of television was more sporadic.

Stop Hinkley Expansion also published a fortnightly newsletter, The Hinkley Inquirer, a follow-on from The Sizewell Reaction, which provided a lively update on the proceedings. Indeed, SHE generally adopted a professional approach which increased their credibility in the eyes of local reporters. For example, Tim Jones said of SHE's media strategy:

"They presented well-researched evidence, brought in several expert witnesses and conducted their publicity campaign with style." (The Bristol Evening Post, 25th Sept. 1989, p.10)

The CEGB produced a newspaper, Hinkley C News, which was distributed to people living in the locality. Also they spent a large sum of money on strategically placing several full-page advertisements in local newspapers including The Bristol Evening Post and The Western Daily Press, as well as the national newspapers. The advertisements stress the CEGB's new 'open' image. For instance, one of the adverts was headed: 'An Open Letter from the CEGB to put Nuclear Power in Perspective.' Tim Jones, reporter for The Bristol Evening Post commented:

"... it's fairly obvious why they put them in at the moment. I mean they're also producing a newspaper which is being circulated to all houses... They're very much more aware of their public image than they used to be." (11th Nov. 1989, p.10)

The greater power and resources of the CEGB, then, meant that it enjoyed a different level of access to the media. It was able to mount a national advertising campaign, it organised PR trips to nuclear power stations for journalists, and it carried out the most extensive monitoring of media coverage of the Hinkley 'C' Inquiry. However, in terms of its credibility, the interview material suggests that local reporters viewed the Board with some suspicion. Moreover, the content analysis suggests that the views of the major objectors received more prominent coverage in The Bristol Evening Post than did the views of the applicant.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has argued that the Hinkley 'C' Inquiry was covered much more extensively in the local than the national press. Although one cannot make large generalisations from an analysis of one local newspaper, other studies confirm that regional newspapers often give relatively greater space to the reporting of environmental issues. Also, the evidence suggests that The Bristol Evening Post cited objectors as sources more often than the CEGB or government. This case study implies that Hall et al.'s (1978) theory of 'primary definers' fails to take into account important differences in source access to local and national newspapers. It indicates that Government and the nuclear industry had less access to the The Bristol Evening Post, or considered the local press as less strategically important, than the major objectors to the construction of Hinkley 'C'.

Also it suggests that resources play a major part in constraining source media strategies. The CEGB was able to carry out extensive monitoring of media coverage of nuclear matters, and mounted an advertising campaign in the national and local press. The opposing groups were not able to compete at a national level, but in terms of their overall campaign budgets they spent a large amount of money on the Inquiry. They had to rely, to a large extent, upon membership subscriptions and upon unpaid voluntary work. Nevertheless, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that one of the major objecting groups, Stop Hinkley Expansion, developed a successful strategy towards obtaining coverage in the local press, and experience gained from participating in previous public inquiries undoubtedly contributed to this.

Finally, the evidence indicates that the objectors were, to some extent, seduced by the public inquiry system. In relative terms, they invested a large amount of resources to opposing the construction of Hinkley 'C' even though they did not expect to block the CEGB's application. Through participating in the rituals of the Public Inquiry they gained a sense of power. But in the final analysis, it was not the objectors' environmental case which finally persuaded the Government to revise Britain's nuclear power programme; it was the power of hard cash.



Since embarking upon this piece of research some indicators suggest that British concern about environmental issues has become less intense. Public opinion polls in January 1991 suggested that people regarded defence and foreign affairs, together with unemployment, as the most important issues facing Britain (MORI poll, Jan. 1991). Certainly, the initial furore of media attention has died down, and both media organisations and environmental groups have been affected by the economic climate. By the beginning of 1991 some of the Environment Correspondents appointed by tabloid newspapers during the 'moral panic' of the late 1980s had been moved to other posts and not replaced. However, there is no doubt that the environment has been firmly placed on the political agenda. A major shift in the way in which we perceive the environment has taken place. No longer can the environment be viewed as a non-partisan issue, or as a topic at the fringes of debate. Environmental pressure groups, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, have greater access to the media now and they have become increasingly adept at managing the agenda. Although media interest has become less high-profile, the environment remains a prominent focus and new ways of addressing 'green' concerns have, to some extent, become incorporated into mainstream political thought.

These shifts in the structure of access have begun to concentrate attention upon the neglected area of sources and the media. This thesis has suggested that there are important theoretical and methodological grounds for rethinking the dominant approach towards the study of source-media relations. The case study of environmental reporting has raised a number of critical questions which need to be addressed by further research. How important are internal and external constraints in determining news sources' media strategies? What factors influence the complex relationship between public opinion, the political domain, and media agendas? Finally, to what extent is environmental coverage typical of the reporting of social problems in general? This final chapter will discuss some of the major implications of the findings presented in the preceding pages, and evaluate the significance of the study in terms of the broader context of mass communications research in general. Also, the chapter will present a number of recommendations for further research in this field.

**(i) News Production and Source Strategies: New Directions in the Sociology of Journalism**

The argument developed thus far is that a major lacuna exists in terms of analysing source-media relations. Most research which addresses the question of source-media relations approaches it from a media-centric position and, until recently, the logic of this practice has not been questioned (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). On the whole, researchers have not considered the perceptions of the sources themselves. Indeed, our knowledge about the relationship between sources and the media is rudimentary. This study, therefore, fills an important gap in the literature. Previous research has shown that official sources, such as government and the courts, tend to gain much greater access to the media concerning a range of topics, than do non-official sources such as pressure groups (Chibnall, 1977; Golding and Middleton, 1982; Schlesinger et al., 1983; Sigal, 1973). However, few studies have investigated the relationship between non-official sources and the media.

The findings of this study suggest that we need to modify Hall et al.'s (1978) structuralist model of source-dependency, which maintains that 'accredited' sources such as the government, the courts and the police, enjoy privileged access to the media. In 'Policing the Crisis' Hall et al. (1978) argue that one of the ways in which ideological hegemony is achieved in capitalist society is through the relationship between powerful sources and the media. Certain sources, it is argued, secure greater access to the media by virtue of their institutional standing, claims to expertise, or representative status. According to Hall et al., it is the:

"... likelihood that those in powerful or high status positions in society who offer opinions about controversial subjects will have their definitions accepted, because such spokesmen are understood to have access to more accurate or specialised information on particular topics than the majority of the population. The result of this structured preference given in the media to the opinions of the powerful is that these 'spokesmen' become what we call the *primary definers* of topics." (original emphasis, 1978:58)

Whilst evidence suggests that official sources, such as government, tend to gain greater access to the media, this model overlooks a number of important facets of the news-production process. In particular, though focusing upon primary definition in the

media, the structuralist model ignores the processes of negotiation and conflict prior to definitions being taken up by the media. As Schlesinger (1990) argues:

"The model given by Hall et al. is one in which primary definitions are conceived of as commanding the field and as producing a dominant ideological effect. While this offers a coherent critique of various forms of pluralism, an uncritical adherence to this model involves paying a price. For the structuralist model is profoundly incurious about the processes whereby sources engage in ideological conflict *prior to or contemporaneous with the appearance of definitions in the media*. It therefore rules out asking questions about how contestation over definitions takes place *within* institutions and organisations reported by the media as well as the concrete strategies pursued as they contend for space." (original emphasis, 1990:68)

A further point concerns the methodology of mainstream studies of source behaviour; for they tend to assume that patterns of source-dependence can be deduced from content analysis, and/or journalistic accounts of source-media relations. While these methods are certainly very useful, what this thesis demonstrates is that they need to be supplemented by interviews with the sources themselves. Indeed, an externalist model of source-media relations recognises that one must take account of source perceptions and strategies. Also, content analysis disjoints texts and assumes that the number of times a given source is mentioned constitutes a reliable measure of its importance. By supplementing this evidence with interviews the meaning and context of messages can be explored. Moreover, content analysis does not reveal the indirect attempts of official sources to influence the agenda, such as the use of 'off-the-record' briefings.

Furthermore, this study suggests that the media should not be treated in a monolithic fashion. The ease of access non-official sources experience differs as between local and national media, and between newspapers and television. The levels of access enjoyed by sources can also be shown to differ within the press and television. For example, the case study of the Hinkley Point Inquiry found that environmental groups were able to gain much greater access to The Bristol Evening Post, a key local newspaper, than to the national press, who did not generally regard the story as newsworthy.

In addition to these strong methodological grounds for developing a new model of source-media relations, there are a number of theoretical issues which need to be addressed. The first point concerns the structuralist assumption that official status implies credibility. Partly as a consequence of the heavy reliance upon quantitative methods, structuralist analysis has neglected to analyse the varying degrees of legitimacy with which journalists and broadcasters judge the claims of 'primary definers'. The interview findings suggest that the journalists and broadcasters generally view Friends of the Earth as more credible than Greenpeace. Despite this, Greenpeace still manage to obtain a high media profile because press releases tend to go direct to the news editors rather than specialist correspondents.

A further difficulty concerns Hall et al.'s failure to take into account inequalities of access among 'accredited sources'. At times some actors obtain much more access to the media than others. The interviews with journalists and broadcasters suggested that some environmental campaigners have become over-accessed by the media. For example, Andrew Lees, water and toxics campaigner for Friends of the Earth, was viewed as a major source by most of the media personnel interviewed.

Also, Hall et al. fail to take into account shifts in the structure of access to the media. The relationship between sources and the media is under continual negotiation; we cannot speak of powerful definers as though the structures of power and influence are static. This study demonstrates how many environmental groups experienced much greater access to the media during the late 1980s because they were officially sourced. Indeed, Chapter 8 suggested that Greenpeace were one of the key 'primary definers' during the media preoccupation with the seal virus in the summer of 1988. Representatives of government and scientists attached to government bodies were slow to respond to the issue and mistrustful of the press, while Greenpeace were quick to capitalize upon media interest.

A related point concerns Hall et al.'s tendency to overlook the role of the media as definers in the agenda-setting process. Although they imply the media sometimes play a primary role in defining the important issues of the day, the strong suggestion is that, in the vast majority of cases, it is the powerful institutional sources who frame the debate. While



there is no doubt that official sources play a key role in shaping the news, under particular circumstances it is the media who take up themes which are later adopted by the privileged institutional sources themselves. The case study of the seal virus demonstrates how, on occasions, the popular press play a crucial role as 'primary definers' in the agenda-setting process. The structuralist model ignores cases where the media influence politicians indirectly through exposing a problem and mobilising the public to put pressure on the government. For example, the case study of the seals issue demonstrates how The Daily Mail and The Mail on Sunday were largely responsible for provoking an outcry among Conservative voters about North Sea pollution.

**(ii) Agenda-building and the Policy-Making Process**

There are several limitations, then, with the structuralist model of source-dependency. This case study of the production of environmental news suggests that the sociology of journalism needs to engage with analyses of the wider policy-making process. It contends that the agenda-building model offers the most promising theory in terms of developing a model of the complex linkages between the political arena, the media and the public. Agenda-building theory acknowledges that agendas are constructed through a contest over definitional power, and does not assume direct audience effects.

Models of agenda-building turn our attention to the role of news-sources. They view sources as employing distinct strategies (cf. Lang and Lang, 1981). The way in which public agendas are constructed involves a process of competition and negotiation. This suggests that we cannot simply assume ideological dominance. Instead, we need to analyse the various forms that strategic action takes. In the next section the social movement literature is discussed. Coupled with the findings of agenda-building studies, alternative theories of social movements suggest that the relationship between collective action and the media is more complex than earlier studies assumed.

### **(iii) Alternative Models of Collective Action**

As previous chapters have indicated, the literature concerning social movements is diverse and wide-ranging. Traditional models assumed that collective action is a cohesive empirical entity which could be invested with a deeper conceptual significance (cf. Melucci, 1989). They failed to account for the complexity and multiplicity of meanings contained within contemporary collective action. Moreover, researchers have analysed social movements for a variety of diverging purposes and have rarely made their key conceptual categories explicit. Part of this problem stems from the difficulty of defining social movements in conceptual terms. The concept of 'social movement' is not particularly useful as it encompasses a number of complex dimensions. Traditionally, the work in this area has relied upon empirical generalisations, rather than developing a model which is sophisticated enough to explain the heterogeneity of collective behaviour. Research into the question of why people participate in collective action has proved largely tenuous, while work explaining the process through which collective action is sustained also needs to be built upon and extended.

The traditional approach towards studying social movements grew out of social psychology. Social psychologists were interested in explaining the reasons why individuals participate in collective action. Participation in social movements was seen in terms of individual grievances and frustrations, relative deprivation and mass society. Because the emphasis was on individual psychological predispositions the role of the mass media was unexplored. Participation in collective action was seen as transitory reflecting swings in mass discontent among social actors (cf. Jenkins, 1983; Klandermans, 1984). As Jenkins observes:

"Traditionally the central problem in this field had been explaining individual participation in social movements. The major formulations - mass society theory, relative deprivation, collective behaviour theory - pointed to sudden increases in individual grievances generated by the 'structural strains' in rapid social change. While specific hypotheses varied, these traditional theories shared the assumptions that movement participation was relatively rare, discontents were transitory, movement and institutionalised actions were arational if not outright irrational". (1983:528)

Research which has attempted to link individual values and ideology with collective behaviour has simplified the nature of social action. It implies that attitudes determine behaviour and divorces values from real physical problems (for example, Inglehart, 1977 and 1990). As Lowe and Rudig maintain:

"... it is always necessary to elucidate how values are created and sustained through actions and this means that, though they may feature as intervening variables, it is seldom appropriate to regard them as independent variables. The focus should rather be upon the ways in which resources (conceived in the broadest possible sense to include historical traditions, modes of political argument, the political skills of actors and so on) are mobilised in pursuit of particular interests generated by the structural context and the ways in which that context is maintained or transformed by the struggles which it facilitates. This directs attention specifically to relations of power". (1986: 520)

The traditional model has been subject to a number of important critiques. The rise of radical social movements in the 1960s, coupled with the findings of a number of empirical studies of movement participation, cast doubt over the closeness of the affinity between individual grievances and mass collective action. Moreover, studies undermined the assumption that responses were essentially irrational (cf. Melucci, 1989).

During the 1970s two alternative models tried to reformulate the problem of social movements. In contrast to earlier approaches, they saw social movements as additional parts of institutionalised actions. The traditional definition of social movements was much wider and included any form of organisation which sought political or personal change (cf. Jenkins, 1983). First, there was the structural model which originated in Europe and developed out of the work of Habermas (1976) and Touraine (1978). Structural theory was concerned to provide an alternative explanation as to why collective action develops. Social movements are produced by structural contradictions within the social system; the emergence of new types of collective action reflects institutional changes in post-industrial capitalism. Thus Touraine (1978) argues that new forms of collective action such as the women's movement or youth organisations, which are defined by their existence beyond the world of employment, seem to be developing and associating with more traditional industrial conflicts. Essentially, social movements are seen as arising in response to crises in the socio-economic or political realm.

In contrast to the structural approach, the second alternative model concentrates upon the question of *how*, not *why*, social movements evolve and are sustained. The resource mobilisation model, which draws heavily upon organisational theory, developed in America and was influenced by a number of theorists (for example, McCarthy and Zald, 1973; Gamson; 1975; Oberschall, 1973). This approach stresses the important of material and symbolic resources (including finance, time, political skills, education and so on), rational action to reach clearly defined goals, and the position of the individual within the organisation. As Klandermans observes:

"In contrast to the traditional social-psychological interpretation, resource mobilisation theory emphasises the importance of structural factors such as the availability of resources to a collectivity and the position of individuals in social networks, and stresses the rationality of participation in social movements". [1984: 583].

Thus McCarthy and Zald (1982) suggest that greater attention needs to be given to the organisational structure of social movements, and to internal and external constraints which influence the form they take:

"The resource mobilisation approach emphasizes both societal support and the constraint of social movement phenomena. It examines the variety of resources that must be mobilised, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for success and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements". (1982: 1213).

The resource mobilisation theory is, in many ways, a product of the American social system. Indeed, McCarthy and Zald acknowledge that it should only be viewed as a "partial theory". Certainly, the structural model and the resource mobilisation approach represent a movement forward from the traditional American studies which tended to reduce social movements to mass collective behaviour. Also they share the advantage of directing attention towards macro factors which shape collective action. Indeed, resource mobilisation theory rightly identifies a major problem with the relative deprivation model; one can identify discontent in all societies and this alone is not enough to explain why people mobilise over certain issues. As Lowe and Goyder argue:

"... even if the attractions of sociability and companionship play a part in recruitment, explanation is still required of why people join environmental groups rather than sports or social clubs". (1986: 524)

However, these alternative approaches contain a number of weaknesses. Each theory offers only a partial explanation of the meaning of social movements. As Melucci maintains:

"Both theories leave certain problems unresolved. Structural theories, based upon systems analysis, explain *why* but not *how* a social movement is established and survives; they hypothesize potential conflict without accounting for concrete collective action. By contrast, resource mobilisation models regard such action as mere data and fail to examine its meaning or orientation. In this instance the *how* and not the *why* of collective action is emphasized. The two perspectives are not irreconcilable, however. While each frequently passes, sometimes implicitly, for a global explanation each is legitimate within its own parameters". (1989: 21-22)

One problem with the resource mobilisation approach is it tends to reduce behaviour to cost/benefit analysis. Collective action is seen rather narrowly in terms of bargaining and negotiation to achieve specific ends. As Melucci observes, individuals develop definitions which are partly the result of negotiated interactions and emotional interplay. There are a number of parallels between resource mobilisation theory and the political exchange theories of Pizzorno (1978) and Crouch and Pizzorno (1978). Political exchange theories also conceive of collective action in terms of the likely benefits or costs. However, they focus upon political effectiveness; the degree to which social movements are successful in achieving their political objectives and influencing policy. Though it is important to take account of the political realm this under-estimates the non-political aspects of social movements (cf. Melucci, 1989).

As well as the difficulties associated with reducing social action to cost/benefit analysis, the resource mobilisation model has failed to offer an adequate alternative explanation to the traditional framework. As Melucci argues, it does not deal with the key problem with the frustration/aggression theory; the assumption that people are able to compare their expectations and rewards at different times, recognise the expected benefits of their action as fair and identify the social causes of their deprivation. Indeed, resource mobilisation theory is blighted by the very weaknesses which characterised earlier models of collective behaviour. Although it assumes people construct a shared comprehension of the costs and benefits of their action - what Melucci calls 'collective identity' - it fails to explore this process. Any adequate model of contemporary collective action must be capable of

explaining how it is that this 'collective identity' is produced and sustained. As Melucci states:

"What was formerly considered a datum (the existence of a movement) is precisely what needs to be explained. Analysis must acknowledge the heterogeneity of collective action and explain how its various aspects are combined and sustained through time. For this purpose, neither the macro-structural models of collective action, nor those based on individuals' motivation are satisfactory, for they lack an understanding of an intermediate level of collective action" (1989: 30)

At this point it is useful to set out some of the major contending theories of social movements. The present thesis is only focusing upon *one* small link in the chain, namely the relationship between non-official organisations and the media. It is not a global theory of social movements per se - it is a partial theory of one major element which contributes to the effective mobilisation of collective action. This thesis, therefore, is not concerned with the question of *why* individuals engage in collective action, or the issue of what is 'new' about contemporary social movements. Rather, it has focused upon the following questions: How do non-official sources come to attract media attention? What is the role of social movements in the elaboration of a social problem? What factors explain their success or failure in realising their goals associated with capturing media interest? And, finally, what is the nature of the relationship between social movements and the media once an issue has been defined as a 'problem'?

The present thesis takes a rather different line of departure to that of mainstream literature on social movements. Recent work in the field of social movements has been preoccupied with the question of what is novel about contemporary forms of collective action. For example, Castells (1983) argues that present-day, urban, protest groups tend to share three main features. First, they concentrate upon mobilising political action. In particular, they see the role of local government as central. Second, they tend to be based around campaigning about services or products which are provided by government, either indirectly or directly - what Castells labels 'collective consumption'. And finally, urban social movements tend to concern themselves with protecting cultural identity which is associated with a specific territory. Modern urban protest organisations tend to be locally based and tend to conceive of themselves as related to city or urban life. Castells maintains:

"... our tried and tested hypothesis is that only when the three themes combine in a movement's practice does it bring about social change, while the separation of any of the goals and a narrow self-definition turn it into an interest group that will be moulded into the established institutions of society, so losing much of its identity and impact ... these three goals were not arrived at by accident but are the major points of opposition against the dominant logics of capitalism, informationalism and statism". (1983: 328)

Thus Castells argues that modern social movements reflect the particular conditions of capitalism. Contemporary protest groups tend to concentrate their energies upon local grassroots activities because they are unable to transform society as a whole. Their unique identity is only retained in so far as they remain on the periphery of major social and political institutions. Castells suggests:

"We argue that they are not agents of structural social change, but symptoms of resistance to the social domination even if, in their effort to resist, they do have major effects on cities and societies". (1983: 329)

A rather different approach is adopted by Inglehart (1990) in Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society. In this work Inglehart consolidates some of his original survey data on Western values and ideologies, presented in The Silent Revolution (1977). Like Castells, Inglehart is interested in exploring the unique character of contemporary social movements. However, Inglehart does not see them as reflecting the dominant forces of capitalism. He argues that the development of modern social movements is part of a wider cultural shift in the values and ideologies of Western publics. Inglehart sees this trend as reflecting the expansion of education, the growth of the middle classes and the blurring of traditional political divisions. In Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society Inglehart examines data from his longitudinal cross-national survey of public opinions and ideologies. He argues that this data supports the theory that Western publics are becoming more concerned with quality-of-life issues, less materialistic and more concerned with self-development. In short, Inglehart suggests there has been a gradual shift from 'materialist' to 'post-materialist' values. The rise of 'post-materialist' values is linked with the trend towards increased economic and political stability in advanced industrial societies. Thus, Inglehart claims:

"Advanced industrial societies are undergoing a gradual shift towards emphasis on belonging, self-expression and the quality of life. This shift can be traced to the unprecedented levels of economic and physical security that

have generally prevailed in these countries since World War II and to the emergence of the welfare state. Whereas previous generations were relatively willing to make trade offs that sacrificed individual autonomy for the sake of economic and physical security, the publics of advanced industrial societies are increasingly likely to take this kind of security for granted - and to accord a high priority to self-expression, both in their work and in political life". (1990: 11)

The rise of new social movements is explained in terms of the gradual influence of post-materialist values. While acknowledging that protest groups reflect the existence of objective problems, Inglehart argues that they also mirror changes in social attitudes, training and skills:

"The rise of the ecology movement, for example, is not simply due to the fact that the environment is in worse condition than it used to be, it is not even clear that it is. Partly this development has taken place because the public has become more sensitive to the quality of the environment than it was a generation ago". (Inglehart, 1990: 372-3)

According to Inglehart, post-materialists are more likely to be concerned about the state of the environment than their predecessors, and they are more likely to favour an informal, less hierarchical, organisational structure. Thus he claims recent social movements tend to exhibit different political styles and their members tend to share new sorts of motivations and skills. Inglehart maintains:

"The new social movements represent a different type of political participation, one that is less elite directed than has generally been true of participation in the past, and one that is shaped to a far greater degree by the individual's values, ideology and political skills. The new social movements are new not only in their goals but also in their political style and in the factors that motivate their activists". (1990: 392)

While Inglehart focuses upon the question of what is new about present day social movements, Melucci (1989) sees this as largely irrelevant. However, one of the unforeseen consequences of focusing upon the question of what is novel about today's social movements is that it has displayed the heterogeneous nature of social action. Melucci (1989) suggests that we need to view collective action as constructed by social actors - as self-produced, rather than given. Melucci observes:



"When considered from this revised angle, the positive - and unintended - result of recent debate about the 'new social movements' is that the image of movements as *personages* seems to have exhausted itself. Discussion about the 'novelty' of contemporary social movements has made possible the recognition of their plurality of meanings and forms of action. Seen in this way, the problem is to understand both the synchronic and diachronic elements of movements, and in turn to explain how their diverse elements are united in organised collective action. (1989: 43)

As Melucci argues, there are a number of problems with the structuralist theory of social movements and the model of value-change. Melucci's approach recognises the diversity and individual variation of collective action, whereas the value-change theory and the structural model tend to emphasise homogeneity. Although these approaches acknowledge the links between the economic, cultural and political spheres, there is a tendency to elevate the primacy of culture or of economics. Also, little attention is given to the role of mass communications in the definition of social problems. However, it is possible to conceive of social movements as signs or symbols in an increasingly complex information system. Thus Melucci maintains:

"Contemporary movements operate as signs, in the sense that they translate their actions into symbolic challenges to the dominant codes ... In this respect, collective action is a **form** whose models of organisation and solidarity deliver a message to the rest of society ... Contemporary social movements stimulate radical questions about the ends of personal and social life and, in so doing, they warn of the crucial problems facing complex societies". (1989: 12)

Other researchers have focused upon the role of news-sources in the elaboration of collective symbols (cf. Gandy, 1980). One consequence of concentrating upon the symbolic nature of collective action, the formation of collective identities and the development of specialised strategies, is it leads one to analyse the way in which the media feed into this process. Gandy (1980) focuses upon the relationship between news-sources and the media. He suggests that non-official and official sources employ distinct strategies towards controlling and manipulating information and signs. Gandy views the relationship between sources and the media as primarily economic; sources exchange information on a cost-cutting basis. Official sources tend to enjoy greater media access because they have greater 'information subsidies' - it is less costly in terms of time and money for media practitioners to use them on a routine basis.

Although social action cannot be simply reduced to cost-benefit analysis, economic factors clearly play a part in information exchange. As Gandy points out, information subsidies may be direct or indirect. Direct subsidies include placing advertisements in media which policy makers are known to monitor, or personally contacting decision-makers. Indirect subsidies could be off-the-record briefings, or press conferences or news releases where the identity of the source is made known but self-interest is concealed. Gandy claims that there are two main stages in the provision of information subsidies to media practitioners:

"The use of journalists and media systems involves a two-stage subsidy. The journalist's costs of producing news are reduced through a variety of techniques utilised by sources to manage the information market. The second stage of the subsidy is complete when the target of the subsidy, an actor in the policy process, gains access to the information at a near zero cost, from a credible source, in a convenient accessible form". (1982: 198)

One advantage of Gandy's approach is it recognises the importance of information strategies. Hall et al's (1978) theory of primary definers implies that sources do not need to employ strategies since they automatically gain access to the media. Future research needs to explore, in greater detail, the nature of strategies used by official and non-official sources. As Gandy argues:

"... future research needs to be beyond agenda-setting to consider the source of the agenda and its impact on the quality of life ... Just as audiences are classified according to race, sex, education and income, we might begin to classify institutional sources into categories that would aid in the anticipation and interpretation of their communication behaviours". (1982: 199)

The literature on social movements, then, needs to connect with the work on source-media relations. The present thesis suggests that the constructivist model is the most useful framework for exploring this field. As Hansen (1991) suggests, social problems are defined collectively and constructed by the media and news-sources. The recent surge of interest in environmental issues should be seen in this context. As Hilgartner and Bosk maintain:

"Specifically, when ecological concepts enter cultural domains, attention should be paid to the conscious manipulation of symbols. The ways in which key operatives select some social problems, formulate them in special ways, and advance them to promote their interests and goals. At the same time the

ecological language calls attention to the resource constraints on operatives as they seek to influence the allocation of collective concern". (1988: 74-75)

The present thesis has explored some of the factors which explain why particular environmental issues came to dominate media agendas during the late 1980s. Future research needs to consolidate the research into social problems and the media and to draw upon the insights offered by recent models of social movements (cf. Melucci, 1989). As Hansen argues:

"It is to a large constructivist framework, and the conceptualisation of the media therein, that we must turn for a more holistic view of media roles in the construction of social problems. Because of the focus on 'social problems' rather than 'the media', such a framework enables a recognition of the interactive and parallel, rather than the unilinear, processes which characterise the emergence and growth of environmental issues as issues for public concern and political action". (1991: 454)

The next section will offer an alternative model of source-media relations. Although the model is still in developmental stage, it isolates a number of key factors which influence the elaboration of social problems in the media.

#### **(iv) Model of Source-Media Relations**

The proposed model of source-media relations' aims to *modify* some elements of Hall et al's theory of primary definers. At the heart of the model lies the notion of competition and negotiation among unequally endowed social actors. It aims to provide a more dynamic explanation of the news-production process by using a wider frame of reference. Thus the model is broader in explanatory scope since it investigates the processes of contestation and negotiation which take place before, or at the same time as, primary definitions appear in the media (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). Also, while Hall et al. imply that 'primary definers' do not need strategies since they automatically secure media access, the present thesis has suggested that news-sources and communicators each pursue tactics towards achieving their own aims. Thus a major advantage of this model over Hall et al.'s is it recognises that sources actively pursue distinct strategies in a highly competitive field. Finally, though the activities of sources and communicators can be treated as analytically distinct, it is argued that there are

links to the broader context. Although the field is not one that accords equal advantage to *all* the players, the activities of news-sources may shape media coverage while at the same time media agendas are the outcome of a complex inter-play between sources, public opinion and various social elites (cf. McQuail and Windahl, 1981).

Although a comprehensive theory of source-communicator relations is still in developmental stage, we can isolate a number of elements which are central to an understanding of this process. The extent to which news-sources are successful in realizing their goals depends upon a number of factors. These factors are interrelated and the precise interplay, or combination of elements, will vary according to different situations and for different media. The elements which have been identified in this piece of research are not intended to be exhaustive, nor mutually exclusive.

Perhaps one of the most important factors in explaining the extent to which sources are successful is the degree to which their demands are institutionalized (cf. Schlesinger, 1990). Once a number of established organisations have grown up around a set of issues, and government agencies have incorporated some of these concerns within their policy agendas, the ground has been laid for 'mass' oriented media campaigns (cf. Schoenfeld, Meir and Griffin, 1979). In the field of environmentalism, pressure groups such as the World Wide Fund for Nature and Friends of the Earth have built up solid institutional profiles and they enjoy considerable access to the media. Environment correspondents tend to view them as reliable and authoritative sources. However, Greenpeace obtains a great deal of media coverage and yet adopts an anti-establishment image. This is explained, in part, by its economic strategy and its internal structure, other elements we will come on to discuss. Yet the degree to which sources become part of an institutional framework is of vital importance in explaining the way some news-sources obtain preferential access and are officially sourced.

A second major factor, which goes some way to explain why particular forms of collective action mobilise when they do, is the cultural climate. In order for news sources to obtain their goals a favourable cultural climate must usually exist. For instance, the

heightened media coverage of environmental affairs occurred in the context of a broader cultural and societal awakening. Evidence suggests that the increased concern about the environment was related to changes in cultural attitudes, rather than simply being a response to deteriorating physical conditions. As Melucci observes:

"The real reason is that we are beginning to perceive reality in different terms; our definitions of individual and collective needs is changing. The ecological problem reflects and expresses a profound change in cultural models and social relations (1989: 95-6).

This shift did not happen abruptly; it represents an underlying trend over the last few decades and reflects social and economic conditions. The explosion of media and public interest in environmental issues during the late 1980s was part of a renewed emphasis upon quality-of-life issues at a time of relative affluence and stability in the Western World. Concern about health, consumer affairs and the environment became intertwined. The seal virus, Karin B affair, salmonella-in-eggs scare, and a whole host of other consumer scandals, seemed to be symptoms of a much wider malaise. Part of the reason why these sorts of issues came to dominate public agendas in the late 1980s was the fact that the economy was relatively healthy and so attention could be turned to other issues than economic ones. When people feel that they are relatively economically secure they tend to focus upon quality-of-life issues which are elevated from their basic needs.

However, it would be far too simplistic to suggest that economic factors *determine* levels of concern about the environment. The relative stability of economic and social conditions only *partially* explains the shift in public attitudes and the reasons why these 'incidents' generated so much media interest.<sup>1</sup> Another factor was that such issues appealed to individuals' self-interest; the public could identify with these problems as possibly affecting themselves and this was exploited by sections of the media. For example, the salmonella-in-eggs scare whipped up a great deal of concern with the responsibility being placed squarely upon the individual to take adequate precautions against infection (cf.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the major problems with the post-materialism theory is that it assumes attitudes determine behaviour. Evidence suggests that the public are not willing to alter their consumer behaviour if it involves making heavy financial costs. Whilst the public may report greater concern for the environment, and embrace altruistic ideals in social surveys, this may not determine their actual behaviour. See Ellicott, S. (1992)

Fowler, 1991). Similarly, the seal virus issue was reported in such a way that individuals could identify with the seals. Indeed, one popular newspaper tied the issue in with fear about AIDS, suggesting that children, like the seals, may be susceptible to catching the AIDS virus through swimming at Britain's beaches. The emphasis upon individuals taking responsibility for their actions, rather than the state intervening to solve the problem, reflected the increasing move towards individualism fostered by the Thatcher government (cf. Fowler, 1991). The media, then, played some part in generating public interest and concern about the environment but it would be a forced simplism to suggest that either public concern prompted media attention or that media attention prompted public concern. However, the present model favours the view that the audience rather than the media were the initiators, though the media reflected and propelled this wider cultural process. The response of the tabloid press was, however, also linked to economic strategies and short term opportunism.

A further factor which goes some way to explain the degree to which sources are successful in their media relations, is the extent to which communicators' and sources' goals become assimilated. Where the goals of media organisations and news-sources converge there is greater likelihood that sources will succeed in realizing their aims. For example, during the late 1980s the interests of environmental groups such as Greenpeace converged with some popular newspapers' campaigns to force the government to treat environmental issues more seriously. Other researchers have also noted the tendency for politicians' and communicators' goals to become assimilated (cf. Gans, 1980). With the Daily Mail's 'Save Our Seals' campaign the interests of Greenpeace and a number of back bench Conservative MPs coincided for a short while in the common pursuit of demonstrating the inadequacies of the government's approach to the environment.

Another factor is the effectiveness of the economic strategies pursued by sources (cf. Gandy 1980 and 1982). Schlesinger notes:

"As media strategies have become increasingly perceived as important to political actors, the surplus within an organisation directed towards symbolic media-oriented action becomes a crucial determinant of effectiveness". (1990: 80).

This thesis has suggested that many of the environmental pressure groups formed in the early 1970s, armed with a stronger financial base, have begun to invest more heavily in a media strategy. Obviously, state organisations tend to have much greater resources at their disposal than do voluntary groups. As Gandy (1982) suggests, the exchange of information is greatly influenced by economic factors and it is through providing what he terms 'information subsidies', or "efforts to reduce the prices faced by others for certain information, in order to increase its consumption" (1982: 8), to and via the media, that the powerful retain their advantaged position in society. As Gandy argues:

"As important as these social explanations may seem to be, it is possible to reduce them to their basic economic considerations. Even social interaction can be seen in terms of costs and benefits, investments and rewards. Journalists have to meet deadlines, editors have to fill space, producers must fill the time between commercials. In order to reduce their uncertainty about meeting these fairly standard organisational requirements, journalists enter into relations of exchange with their sources that have many of the qualities of traditional economic markets. Although there is no exchange of cash, except in those few cases of 'cheque-book journalism', where reporters pay their sources for information, there is still an exchange of value" (1982: 11).

However, despite competing against economically powerful official sources, voluntary groups can sometimes mount successful media campaigns - often through becoming more officially sourced. Once lobby groups become institutionalised they are more likely to be cited by official sources and to be brought into the media frame. A carefully targeted strategy aimed at mobilising an issue to draw attention to wider concerns can be very successful in the realm of symbolic politics, despite relatively small information subsidies. For example, although Greenpeace was competing with other more established news-sources, they were able to use the seal virus story very effectively to attract attention to wider questions about the government's policy towards the environment.

A related point concerns the importance of a source's internal structure and the degree to which it has developed a clear message, identified a target audience and medium, and prepared the way so that it can have maximum impact (cf. Schlesinger, 1990; Wilson, 1985). While the effectiveness of a public relations strategy often reflects the size of a group's budget, there is no simple correlation between financial base and successful strategic action.

In particular, research suggests that non-official sources may enjoy *relatively* greater access to the local press.

For example, the case study of the Hinkley Inquiry found that the Central Electricity Generating Board was able to mount the most sophisticated national public relations exercise; yet local journalists devoted a lot of space to the views of Stop Hinkley Expansion (which had a relatively small budget compared to the Consortium of Local Authorities).

Thus, the model presented here suggests that we need to make certain modifications to Hall et al.'s theory of hegemonic control. While it is recognised that official sources are structurally advantaged in their access to the media, the evidence presented implies that there are limits to this ideological dominance. Also, as Golding observes in relation to welfare issues:

"Given a substantial, powerful and articulate social sector able to disseminate its own highly cogent and increasingly assertive world view, the opportunities for a hegemonic triumph by an executive with the ideological energy of even the Thatcher administration do seem, in this instance, to be significantly limited". (1992: 519)

Further research should seek to establish the extent to which sources' goals converge or conflict. Although studies have undoubtedly shown that the state dominates institutional reportage, it is nevertheless highly relevant to analyse the role played by official sources in constructing political agendas. Why is it that certain non-official sources enter the institutional arena, whilst others remain on the periphery of debate? What factors explain their success or failure in effectively mounting a public relations campaign? And what role do non-official sources play in the complex negotiation of the political agenda? Answers to these sorts of questions can best be achieved through observation and interviews with the news-sources themselves, rather than simply deducing media strategies from a reading of media discourse. This study has suggested that there are important variations between and within the media, thus it is necessary to determine the ways in which news-sources (institutional and non-official) target particular media. In order to enable non-official sources to become more heavily accessed we need to have a fuller understanding of these processes.



The main advantage of the proposed model over Hall et al's, therefore, is its broader explanatory framework which does not render irrelevant questions about the process of competition and negotiation out of which primary definitions emerge. It suggests that the communicator and society are partially assimilated with one another; the development of social movements must be viewed in terms of wider cultural shifts. Finally, unequally distributed material and symbolic resources play a large part in determining the strategies which news-sources adopt.

**(v) Limitations of the Study**

Although the research sought to break new ground in exploring source-media relations, it does have important limitations. Due to financial and time constraints it was not possible to carry out a comprehensive content analysis of press and television coverage over a long time span. In particular, the findings from the pilot content analysis of a one week sample of national press coverage should be treated with some caution; they offer general indicators, rather than conclusive evidence. Resource constraints also precluded an extensive analysis of the local press. Though the case study of the Hinkley Point Inquiry found that The Bristol Evening Post devoted a large amount of space to the views of those who opposed the construction of the nuclear reactor, it is not clear whether one can make generalisations based upon these findings.

Another limitation concerns the subjective nature of semi-structured interviews. Although all possible steps were taken to reduce bias, there is no accurate means of checking the reliability of responses. Yet one should remember that problems of bias and reliability beset the most quantitative of approaches (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Gaining access to grassroots environmental campaigners was also problematic. Generally the environmental groups only permitted access to information/media personnel, who do not tend to have such a direct, personal relationship with correspondents as the actual campaigners. Thus the interview findings may have been broader in explanatory scope had access to grassroots campaigners been granted.

## **(vi) Recommendations for Future Research**

Bearing in mind the limitations discussed above, several recommendations can be made for further research concerning the production of environmental news and, more generally, the sociology of mass communications. This thesis has suggested that the analysis of source-media relations, through using externalist evidence, is still at an exploratory stage. Researchers need to consolidate our knowledge, to date, through carrying out more detailed, comprehensive studies of a range of official and non-official sources, and the extent to which they pursue strategies towards the media. In particular, researchers need to investigate more fully the importance of internal and external constraints upon the media strategies which sources adopt.

There is also a need for international comparative work which takes a cross-cultural perspective. Our knowledge about the influence of cultural factors upon media and sources is rudimentary. In particular, it is very difficult to compare the findings of content analyses of environmental reporting in different countries, because researchers' coding schedules vary so much. However, to some extent, this collaborative approach is already beginning to be adopted by researchers focusing upon the environment (for example, Hansen 1990b), perhaps reflecting the fact that the environment has become such a pressing international concern. But such an approach also needs to become an explicit framework for the wider analysis of source-media relations.

Also, further case studies of the reporting of specific social problems need to be made. This piece of research suggests that the case study method is a valuable tool for revealing general principles about the nature of mass communication. Further case studies of a range of different issues would reveal the complexity of this process and the way in which circumstantial factors influence the course of events. In particular, further investigation is needed to follow up the findings of the case study of the seals issue, which suggested that the popular press sometimes play a key role in shaping public attitudes and political agendas. Media researchers should seek to consolidate existing knowledge about the complex interactions between public opinion, political priorities and media agendas. A detailed study of the nature and influence of public opinion is a somewhat formidable task beyond the scope

of this thesis, but it would have been interesting to follow trends in public opinion, and to explore the way this interacts with political developments and levels of media saturation.

Also beyond the confines of this study was a comprehensive analysis of relations between sources and the local press. However, research is needed to explore differential access and credibility of major sources targeting regional newspapers. There has been a general tendency for researchers to overlook the role of local newspapers; mainstream analyses of source-media relations have focused almost exclusively upon national media and London-based sources. Similarly, to date, very few case studies of local press coverage of environmental issues have been made.

Finally, research needs to further explore the degree to which the production of environmental news is typical of the reporting of other social problems. This thesis suggests that in some important respects environmental reporting is untypical of the production of news in other more established specialist areas, such as industrial relations or crime reporting, since there is no consensus about what exactly constitutes 'the environment'. Future studies should explore this question through focusing upon a range of different issues and looking at the way in which they are socially constructed.

#### **(vii) Final Observations**

This thesis suggests, then, that we should recognise the centrality of the issue of source-media relations to the sociology of mass communications. More research needs to be carried out to investigate the ways in which official and non-official sources interact with the media. Though empirical studies clearly demonstrate that agencies of the state tend to enjoy the most privileged access to the media, we should not neglect the role of non-official sources. Evidence suggests that many of the pressure groups which were formed in the early 1970s have become more adept in their approaches towards the media. In some cases, they have become key players in the negotiation of the political agenda. However, it is equally important to look at the reasons why some non-official sources have failed to attract widespread media attention. This obviously raises wider questions about the unequal distribution of resources and the adequacy of the Pluralist model of power. This study argues

that we must analyse mass communications in terms of the complex linkages between the media, the public arena and the political domain. By largely concentrating upon the ways in which the media make use of sources, the sociology of journalism has ignored a key aspect of the news production process.

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## APPENDIX 1:

### LIST OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

The following list provides details of the name, position and place of work of each interviewee, together with the date when when interview was conducted, where it took place and the number of double-spaced A4 pages of each interview transcript. (The number of pages proved a better indicator of the relative length of the interviews than the length of the tape-recordings since many of the interviews were characterised by a number of interruptions, such as telephone calls, and obviously some of the respondents spoke much faster and with fewer pauses than others). The only joint interview that was conducted was with David Jones and Julian Rollins, formerly of Today.

#### Television Journalists

- 1) Ian Breach, Environment Correspondent, BBC - 27th Nov. 1990 - pub - 30 pages.
- 2) Ashley Bruce, Producer of Channel Four documentary series 'Fragile Earth' - 8th Dec. 1989 - restaurant - 29 pages.
- 3) Tim Gardam, Former Editor of BBC's 'Panorama' - 4th Dec. 1989 - office - not tape-recorded.
- 4) Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor, ITN - 17th Jan. 1990 - office - 40 pages.
- 5) Mike Walsh, Reporter for ITV's 'World in Action', 10th Jan. 1990 - office and pub - 30 pages.
- 6) James Wilkinson, Science Correspondent, BBC - 5th Dec. 1989 - office - 19 pages.

#### Print Journalists

- 1) John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent, The Guardian - 11th Jan. 1989 - office - approx. 20 pages.
- 2) Paul Crosbie, Consumer Affairs Editor, The Daily Express - 31st Oct. 1989 - office - approx 20. pages.
- 3) James Davies, Environment Correspondent, The Daily Express - 31st Oct. 1989 - office - 23 pages.
- 4) John Hunt, Environment Correspondent, The Financial Times - 24th Jan. 1989 - canteen - 28 pages.
- 5) David Jones ( former Environment Editor) and Julian Rollins ( former Environment Correspondent ) Today - 3rd Nov. 1989 - office - 22 pages.
- 6) Tim Jones, Reporter, The Bristol Evening Post - 11th Nov. 1988 - office - approx. 20 pages.
- 7) Geoffrey Lean, Environment Correspondent, The Observer - 17th Jan. 1989 - office - approx. 26 pages.

- 8) Michael McCarthy, Environment Correspondent, The Times - 22nd Feb. 1991 - canteen - 36 pages.
- 9) Peter Marsh, Chemicals Correspondent, The Financial Times - 23rd Jan. 1989 - office - 14 pages.
- 10) Roger Milne, Environment Consultant, The New Scientist - 23rd Jan. 1989 - pub - not tape-recorded.
- 11) Richard North, former Environment Correspondent, The Independent - 15th March 1989 - office - 20 pages.
- 12) Richard Palmer, former Environment Correspondent, The Sunday Times - 14th Feb. 1989 - office - 22 pages.
- 13) Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent, The Daily Mail - 25th July 1989 - office - 20 pages.
- 14) Peter Usher, Reporter for the 'Save Our Seals' campaign, The Daily Mail - 25th July 1989 - office - 18 pages.

#### **Representatives of Environmental Organisations**

- 1) Tim Brown, Information Officer, The National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection - 8th June 1988 - office - not tape-recorded.
- 2) Mike Birkin, Pollution Campaigner, Bristol Friends of the Earth - 5th Jan. 1989 - office - approx. 12 pages.
- 3) Stan Crush, Press Officer, Greenpeace - 3rd May 1989 - office - not tape-recorded.
- 4) Philip Glover, Tropical Rainforest Campaigner, Bristol Friends of the Earth - 17th Nov. 1988 - office - not tape-recorded.
- 5) Eve Kerswill, Press Officer, Consortium of Opposing Local Authorities - 4th Jan. 1989 - office - approx. 7 pages.
- 6) Jan McHarry, Senior Information Officer, Friends of the Earth - 17th July 1989 - office - 23 pages.
- 7) Emma-Louise O'Reilly, Former Press Officer, The National Trust - 13th Dec. 1989 - office - 20 pages.
- 8) Nicola Ramsden, Campaigner, Bristol Friends of the Earth - Jan. 1989 - office - not tape-recorded.
- 9) Chris Rose, Director, Media Natura - 24th Jan. 1990 - office - 18 pages.
- 10) Jill Sutcliffe, Information Officer, Stop Hinkley Expansion - Jan. 1989 - office - not tape-recorded.
- 11) Lucy Thorp, Press Officer, Greenpeace - 22nd Jan. 1991 - office - 25 pages.
- 12) Neil Verlander, Information Officer, Friends of the Earth - 22nd June 1989 - office - 21 pages.

### **Representatives of the Department of the Environment**

- 1) Press Officer 1, Department of the Environment - 28th May 1991 - office - 27 pages.
- 2) Press Officer 2, Department of the Environment - 28th May 1991 - office - 13 pages.

### **Representatives of Industry**

- 1) Peter Ditton, Press Officer, Confederation of British Industry - 24th Feb. 1989 - office - 18 pages.
- 2) Olive Van de Worp, Public Relations Officer, Central Electricity Generating Board, Bristol - 6th January 1989 - office - 30 pages.

### **Representatives of Scientific Bodies**

- 1) Tony Ashmore, Education Officer, The Royal Society of Chemistry - 31st May 1988 - office - not tape-recorded.
- 2) John Durant, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, The Science Museum - 7th Aug. 1989 - office - not tape-recorded.
- 3) Imelda Topping, Press and Publicity Officer, The Royal Society of Chemistry - 15th Aug. 1989 - office - not tape-recorded.

**Total Number of Interviewees: 40**

**Average Length of Transcripts: 22 pages**

## **APPENDIX 2:**

### **INTERVIEW SCHEDULES**

(These were used as a general framework for the interviews. The questions were not asked in any particular order).

#### **(i) Interview Schedule: Journalists and Broadcasters**

- 1) The environment has recently become high up on the political agenda again. Why do you think this is so? Is it due to the work of social movements or to objective change in the physical world or for other reasons, perhaps political?
- 2) How does (name of newspaper or television station) organise the coverage of the environment? How is it decided who covers particular environmental issues?
- 3) When were you first appointed?
- 4) How has reporting on the environment changed in recent months?
- 5) What do you think are the most important pollution topics being covered by journalists at the moment?
- 6) What factors dictate whether a particular pollution topic is covered?
- 7) Are there any specific cases of environmental issues that you can think of which you would have liked to cover but you did not get the opportunity or chance to report on?
- 8) What problems are involved in making complex scientific information comprehensible and interesting to your main readership?
- 9) What is your relationship like with environmental pressure groups? How often do you go to them for information?
- 10) What is your relationship like with scientists and experts? How often are they consulted for information?
- 11) What is your relationship like with industry? What do you think of the main industries' PR?
- 12) How much do you rely upon official sources of information?
- 13) How much decision-making pressure is there to cover stories in particular ways? How much freedom have you got to cover environmental issues in the way that you would like to?
- 14) What difficulties have you experienced when covering environmental stories?
- 15) How often do you use other media as sources of information?





# Source strategies and the communication of environmental affairs

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## Introduction

As we enter the 1990s, surely one of the most crucial issues will be the communication of environmental affairs. Television, press and radio hold an enormous responsibility in ensuring that these issues are communicated accurately, clearly and in such a way as to sustain the already growing mass interest in the quality of the environment. Given the gradual growth in environmental awareness that has occurred since the 1970s, coupled with the urgency of the problems we face, it is somewhat surprising that few comprehensive sociological studies have been carried out in this field. Moreover, this also holds true for other disciplines concerned with analysing environmental matters (Burgess, 1990). To what extent do environmental pressure groups employ strategies to gain media attention? What factors govern their success or failure in gaining favourable, in-depth treatment? How do environment correspondents see the agenda developing and what sort of assumptions do they make about our relationship with nature? Are journalists in the field professional enough in their treatment of these issues and do they need to have scientific training? These questions have rarely been considered in the literature.

This article will concentrate upon exploring two main issues: how environment correspondents in Britain see the agenda developing and the extent to which environmental pressure groups employ strategies in order to achieve media attention. I will provide at least some of the answers to these questions, using preliminary research findings from several in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out between January 1989 and January 1991 with: journalists covering environmental issues in the national daily

press and Sunday newspapers; broadcasters covering environmental affairs; and representatives of environmental pressure groups, of related interest groups and of industry. In addition, two case studies of the press coverage of environmental issues were carried out. The case studies were based upon the qualitative analysis of interview material in conjunction with media texts. One was of national press coverage of the seal plague, a virus which killed a large number of common seals off the Norfolk coast during the summer of 1988. The other case study analysed local and national press coverage of the inquiry into the building of a third nuclear reactor at Hinkley Point, Somerset, between October 1988 and December 1989.

The few studies that have been carried out in this area have tended to rely primarily upon quantitative methods such as content analysis of media texts or questionnaire-based surveys (e.g. Brookes et al., 1976). This is perhaps a reflection of the previous dominance of a tradition within sociology that assumed that the media have a direct effect upon the audience. While quantitative methods are certainly very useful in many areas of media analysis they do not lend themselves very well to the field of environmental reporting. As Susan MacMillan (1988) has noted, quantitative methods are inappropriate if one seeks to uncover the latent meanings within media discourse and the taken-for-granted assumptions of journalists covering environmental matters. Indeed, less structured methods allow scope for creativity and interpretation and are no less valid than more positivist approaches. Whilst content analysis produces a huge amount of statistical information on the frequency with which items appear, it does not allow the researcher to analyse how meanings are constructed through language and imagery and the overall context in which they are placed.

### **September 1988: a turning point in 'green' awareness?**

In recent years the concept of 'environmentalism' has become very popular. But what do we mean by the term and how does it differ from conservationism? While conservationism is essentially about preserving the natural environment, environmentalism embraces a whole political movement which challenges the basis of industrial man's relationship with nature. As McCormick (1989: 47-8) argues:

. . . if nature protection had been a moral crusade centered on the nonhuman environment and conservation a utilitarian movement centered on the rational management of natural resources, environmentalism centered on humanity and its surroundings. For protectionists, the issue was wildlife and habitat; for the New Environmentalists, human survival itself was at stake. There was a broader conception of the place of man [*sic*] in the biosphere, a more sophisticated

understanding of that relationship, and a note of crisis that was greater and broader than it had been in the earlier conservation movement.

The term 'environmentalism' is not unproblematic since it refers to a wide range of ecological issues — from pollution and green consumerism to landscape change and nature conservation. But what is characteristic about this social concept is that these different aspects of our relationship with nature are seen as interconnected. Rather than reflecting reality the 'environment' is a social construction and the media play a crucial role in defining how we view our relationship with nature. As Lowe and Morrison argue:

The difference in the reporting of, say, industrial affairs or race is that, in these other areas, there operates a pre-existing cultural definition of the subject matter so that the parameters of the debate are already laid down and the encoding of news circumscribes oppositional elements. There is no equivalent, in conventional wisdom, regarding the general nature and cause of environmental problems, and therefore greater scope for unconventional views to prevail. . . . However although a critique of technological progress is implicit in many environmental events, the reporting of such events can either point up this oppositional message or mask it, through the encoding of news in terms which emphasize scientific remedies, technological fixes or simply the extraordinary (and therefore the apparently exceptional) character of environmental accidents. (1984: 79)

Indeed, Ian Breach, Environment Correspondent for BBC television news, maintains: 'there's a continual battle over not just whether it's important but over what actually constitutes an environment story' (Interview, 27 November 1990).

Mrs Thatcher's 'green' speech to the Royal Society on 27 September 1988 had a profound effect upon the media agenda of environmental issues. Her speech acted as a catalyst for what was already a simmering debate over environmental awareness. Green issues are no longer treated as on the fringe or cranky and environmental pressure groups are deluged with calls from reporters hungry for story lines. Before Mrs Thatcher's speech most of the serious papers had their own environment correspondents but few mid-market or popular papers employed specialists in this area. Since then virtually all of the mid-market and popular newspapers have appointed environment correspondents.

However, it was not until early 1990, when it had become obvious that environmental issues were unlikely to be transient and had become a mainstream area within journalism, that the BBC and ITN decided to employ their own environment correspondents, Ian Breach and Justyn Jones. Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN explained:

In the past we've always thought that separate components of environmental stories can be covered by other correspondents. . . . I think in the past year it's

become obvious that those separate components are best brought together into one person. And the environment is now a clearly defined field of journalism that it wasn't until twelve months ago really. Some of us have thought for a long time that that's obviously been the case but management didn't decide so until last year. (Interview, 17 January 1990)

But why did television take so long to act when virtually all the national newspapers had appointed environment correspondents in early 1989? The answer is unclear, but what seems certain is that both print journalists and broadcasters only began to treat the environment as an established area within journalism once Mrs Thatcher had publicly expressed her concern about ecological problems. Ian Breach, Environment Correspondent for BBC television news, suggests that part of the reason why television lagged behind the press derives from the attitudes of television editors and producers, who are largely arts graduates, towards complex scientific issues covered by television news broadcasts. A further explanation may be that the press, especially the quality newspapers, receive far more letters about environmental matters, to which in time they respond, than does television. The BBC's Ian Breach argues:

What they don't get in the same profusion as newspapers, particularly the broadsheets get, is letters indicating their audience's deep concerns. I used to edit the letters page on the *Guardian*. I did it for eighteen months, and so I saw a lot of letters and even in those long ago days it was getting a lot of letters about environmental concerns and they feed through into the kind of editorial policies the paper decides to adopt. . . so there's a community of interest which develops between the readers and the newspapers which you don't have in news on television, certainly. I think another reason is that in the main those who run broadcast networks, and this is true of both radio and television, tend to be arts biased, non-science, non-technical graduates who have found, traditionally, issues like CFCs a bit tricky to get to grips with. (Interview, 27 November 1990)

Several factors led to the rise of the environment to the top of the political agenda. First of all, there was an accumulation of scientific evidence about environmental deterioration. The importance of the ozone layer in the eco-system was first recognized in the 1970s. However, further evidence was provided in 1986 when the scientist, Joe Farman, confirmed the existence of the hole in the ozone layer in Antarctica. The response to his report, later issued by the Department of the Environment (DoE), indicated substantial public interest. International political reaction to new scientific evidence was slow and uncertain. The first global treaty to cut air pollution agreed to reduce chlorofluorocarbons by 50 percent by the end of the century, but the Montreal agreement contained a number of loopholes (Gribbin, 1988). In short, these political initiatives reflected the fact that issues such as global warming and ozone had moved up the scientific agenda. Agreement among scientists was seen by many journalists as being

an important factor. For example, Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor at ITN, claims:

The fact that the media has, by and large, carried more coverage is derivative of the changes in scientific knowledge. It has become easier to get pieces on because five years ago all you could say was some scientists think that the ozone layer might be damaged by chlorofluorocarbons and now you can say that they all agree that it is being damaged by chlorofluorocarbons (Interview, 17 January 1990)

This is echoed by James Wilkinson, the BBC Science Correspondent:

I mean if scientists are fairly agreed that something serious is happening then I would take more notice of them than I would necessarily of an organization like Greenpeace claiming something's happening because it doesn't quite have the authority of some other organizations or that conventional scientists have. (Interview, 5 December 1989)

The destruction of the ozone layer and the warming of the earth's atmosphere have been the concern of environmental pressure groups for many years (McCormick, 1989; Hansen, 1990). Indeed, these environmental threats, far from being a recent discovery, have a long history in scientific circles. For example, there has been speculation about acid pollution since the eighteenth century and about global warming since the 1930s (McCormick, 1989). However, it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s that environmentalism first took off in Britain with the publication of *The Limits to Growth Report* (Meadows et al., 1972), and then *Blueprint for Survival* (*The Ecologist*, 1972) and in the USA with *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher, 1974). These radical publications offered social scientific arguments in support of the theory that the world's resources were finite and in danger of becoming exhausted by the end of the century. But the increase in public concern about environmental issues, which was heightened by *Limits to Growth*, began to wane after its alarmist predictions were rapidly undermined through counter-evidence.

What we are now witnessing is further evidence of an environmental crisis, but this time it is the natural scientists who are issuing the warnings. However, although we have more scientific evidence about changes to the global climatic system, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about their significance due to the extremely complex nature of these phenomena. Rather than these issues becoming more serious, they have become *politicized* (Lowe and Morrison, 1984; Hansen, 1990). Our views about the objective physical world, then, are not uninfluenced by socio-political factors (Woolley, 1989). Mrs Thatcher's green 'conversion' was undoubtedly influenced by other politicians in Europe taking environmental issues more seriously.

Indeed, since the 1970s this new approach to nature has slowly been filtering through to sections of the media. In television there has been a gradual movement away from the traditional natural history style of documentary, which divorced environmental issues from their social and political context, towards environmental programmes with a strong campaigning element encompassing a variety of different genres (MacMillan, 1988; Salmon, 1988). Documentaries on the environment will continue to carry political angles in the 1990s but these are likely to be challenged by the Conservative Party as this type of programme backfires on them. Ashley Bruce, Producer of the Channel Four documentary, 'Fragile Earth', notes: 'It will dawn on them [the Conservative government] pretty soon that all these environmental programmes are just as subversive as anything else, if it hasn't already' (Interview, 8 December 1989).

A second factor which led to the environment becoming a prominent issue on the political agenda in the late 1980s was growing public concern about environmental issues. This public concern was heightened by events during the summer of 1988, namely the threat posed by a cargo of toxic waste carried by the freighter *Karin B* and a mystery virus which killed large numbers of common seals in Europe. These events were seen by many journalists as an important turning point in the media coverage of environmental affairs. For example, Geoffrey Lean, Environment Correspondent for the *Observer* stated:

I think this is a very, very delayed reaction to something that was going on and on and I think it's been done very skilfully. The immediate reason for that is that the Conservatives saw the issue shooting up in the polls. I think they did go through a transition this summer with the seals in the North Sea and the *Karin B*, raised in the media following each other which, in a way, moved middle Britain in a way that perhaps middle Britain hadn't been moved before. (Interview, 17 January 1989)

John Ardill, former Environment Correspondent for the *Guardian*, concurred: 'I mean very important things last summer were the seal deaths and the *Karin B* toxic waste ship which happened at a very good time for the newspapers and the rest of the media' (Interview, 11 January 1989).

These two events attracted considerable media attention because they satisfied a number of news values. These news values included the ease with which journalists could get hold of dramatic, visually appealing pictures; the international nature of the issues; the unexpectedness of the events and the negative nature of these items (Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Galtung and Ruge, 1973; Molotch and Lester, 1974; Gans, 1979; Einsiedel, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Warren, 1990). It appears that social issues are sustained in the media by factors intrinsic to the issue and by external social and political forces. In addition, they may be aided by a certain degree of fortuitousness. Had the seal plague and the *Karin B* affair not

happened during August then they might not have attracted so much attention; for during the 'silly season' when Parliament is in recess there is relatively little political or business news around so environmental stories do not have to compete with so many 'hard' news items.

*The seal plague as an issue-threshold for environmental issues*

The seal plague, with its emotive, visual appeal, marked an issue-threshold for environmental matters. From the summer of 1988 onwards environmental issues in general came to be viewed as legitimate concerns. Often it is a specific event which draws attention to general issues concerning the environment (Solesbury, 1976). Indeed, a fundamental difficulty has been that while environmental issues tend to be drawn-out processes which are not clearly visible, the media feed upon short, sharp, highly visible events (Schoenfeld et al., 1979; Hansen, 1990). Thus, before the recent turning point in environmental awareness, immediate events such as oil spills received greater media attention than long-term processes such as global warming (Warren, 1990). As Ian Breach, Environment Correspondent for BBC News, argues:

There is never a day when you're going to be able to say suddenly the last remaining mating couple of . . . whatever disappeared yesterday and that's the end of it folks. It's a remorseless erosion of the eco-system which is a much more difficult story to tell. And the occasional outbreaks of illness or death among certain animals, they make the headlines but they're usually not . . . used as a punctuation in that overall story of damage of our planetary system. (Interview, 27 November 1990)

The seal plague, however, satisfied a number of news values. Some journalists feel that the *Daily Mail* took up the seal campaign because it came to Lord Rothermere's attention through some of his daughter's friends, who were interested in environmental issues. Whether this is purely anecdotal or not, it appears that the newspaper had already decided to start up a wildlife campaign with a major human interest component and the seal story provided all of these elements. As Chris Rose, director of Media Natura,<sup>1</sup> observes:

The *Daily Mail* wanted to do something which combined human interest, like Aids for example, with animals and they already wanted to do that before they heard about the seals. . . . You know it was a virus so it was a bit like Aids . . . it meant that you were dealing with the fate of animals at an individual level and people can relate to that, especially *Daily Mail* readers, who are largely women and relatively well off. So it was an ideal story for them. (Interview, 24 January 1990)



The *Daily Mail's* 'Save Our Seals' campaign, launched in August 1988 and sustained for over a year, alerted members of the public and Conservative politicians to the wider network of issues concerning the quality of the environment as a whole. The 'Save Our Seals' campaign raised thousands of pounds to help common seals, which were found to be dying in large numbers off the coast of Norfolk, from an unknown virus. The *Daily Mail*, and a number of other tabloid newspapers including the *Daily Star* and the *People*, favoured the explanation that the virus was related to pollution, even though there was a lot of uncertainty among scientists as to the precise cause of the disease. And the tabloid press focused on the threat that pollution posed to human beings. For example, a full-page editorial in the *Mail on Sunday* claimed:

Be in no doubt the problem of the seals is only a tiny part of a potentially calamitous problem. Three weeks ago this newspaper reported that three young boys in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, had developed a mysterious and debilitating ailment, causing near paralysis in their legs. The cause? Almost certainly a virus contracted whilst swimming in sewage-polluted seas near their home. (28 August 1988: 8)

The seal virus, then, was used by the popular press as a peg to focus on environmental issues in the broader sense. The seal story marked an issue-threshold for ecological issues which were already attracting considerable concern from the public.

Indeed, the success of the *Daily Mail's* campaign was one of the factors, as Richard North, Environment Correspondent on the *Independent*, has observed, that led the former Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher to recognize the extent of public concern about environmental issues. He stated on Radio Four's 'Today' programme that it was the *Daily Mail's* coverage of the *Karin B* affair and the seals campaign which forced Mrs Thatcher to take action:

She would read the same thing millions of times in the *Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Independent* and say these people are whingers. But when the *Daily Mail* takes it up she realizes it must be a genuine popular concern and she is sensible enough a politician to follow their lead. (Quoted in the *Daily Mail*, 29 September 1988)

However, one should not assume that the *Daily Mail* campaign had a direct effect upon readers; opinion polls suggest that concern over environmental issues had been gradually rising over a long period of time as the general quality of life in Britain and in the West generally has improved (Anthony, 1982). Indeed, one weakness of agenda-setting studies, for example McCombs and Shaw (1972), has been that they have tended to assume that media coverage has a direct effect upon the audience

(Eyal, 1981; Lang and Lang, 1981; Fejes, 1984). And sociological research indicates that the media generally follow rather than initiate environmental awareness (Rubin and Sachs, 1973; Morgan, 1988).

An important question raised by previous agenda-setting studies is how certain issues, which have attracted some initial media interest, come to receive sustained coverage and spawn governmental action (Downs, 1972; Solesbury, 1976; Lang and Lang, 1981). A factor which helped sustain the *Daily Mail's* campaign was that many famous personalities, including several from show business, were willing to pledge their support. Indeed, popular newspapers generally covered the seal plague in a lightweight entertainment format, through using the support of famous personalities, and by offering readers campaign merchandise. Since there is such a high degree of competition between stories within newspapers, this gave the seals issue an added dimension. As Downs argues:

The requirement that a problem be dramatic and exciting is important to the maintenance of public interest in it because *all news is in reality 'consumed' by much of the American public (and by publics everywhere) largely as a form of entertainment*. As such it competes with other types of entertainment for a share of each person's time. Hence in the fierce struggle for space in the highly limited universe of television viewing time or newsprint, each issue must vie not only with other social problems but also with a multitude of other non-news items that are often much more pleasant for the public to contemplate. (1972: 67, original emphasis)

In contrast, the Hinkley Point Inquiry attracted very little national newspaper coverage, especially in the tabloids, except on the opening day. The inquiry was not regarded as being very newsworthy because many of the issues had been raised before at the Sizewell B Inquiry and because of the rather humdrum nature of the proceedings. David Jones, former Environment Editor for *Today* explained: 'It's dry, it's dull. . . . It's dull, we don't cover public inquiries very much' (3 November 1989).

So the 'Save Our Seals' campaign illustrates how national press coverage can, in particular instances, have a direct effect upon the political agenda. What triggered the environment to move up the political agenda again was Mrs Thatcher's 'green' speech to the Royal Society. Virtually all of the journalists interviewed stated that more weight was given to environmental issues as a result of Mrs Thatcher's speech. For example, Sean Ryan, former Environment Correspondent for the *Daily Mail*, observed:

And I think also it made newspaper editors think about their coverage of the environment. Very often the Prime Ministerial lead is taken and then followed by newspapers. . . . Politicians and the media both immediately started to take much more notice of what the environmental groups were saying. (Interview, 25 July 1989)

Once Mrs Thatcher, along with other prominent figures such as Prince Charles and the Queen, publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of some of the claims of environmental pressure groups, news values regarding environmental affairs underwent an important change. Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN, claims that environmental stories no longer have to include all the ingredients they previously had to have to be accepted by news editors:

I mean I think now everyone's attuned and the kind of threshold of what you have to offer as a reporter to your newsdesk and to programme editors is lower. They will now accept stories with less pictures and less victims than they would three or four years ago. (Interview, 17 January 1990)

However, although environment stories have a lower threshold, very rarely do they feature prominently in the running order of the day's news diary. As Ian Breach, Environment Correspondent for BBC News, maintains:

. . . when push comes to shove and it's a heavy news day in Westminster then an environment story won't see the light of day. It'll slide off the edge. And the only things, you know, on a day like the resignation of Heseltine or a bid for the leadership . . . the only other story that you'd get on is a major foreign story, a mass murder, something absolutely stupefyingly newsworthy. It wouldn't be Greenpeace abseiling from Tower Bridge, as important as the message in that exercise might be. (Interview, 27 November 1990)

To some extent the media take up issues which have already been defined as legitimate by those in power (Solesbury, 1976; Hall et al., 1978). Attempts by environmental pressure groups to manage the agenda are therefore crucial. However, as has recently been argued, the relationship between media and sources has rarely been adequately analysed by sociologists (Schlesinger, 1990). The studies which have devoted attention to this area are, with a few exceptions, rather dated (Gandy, 1980; Lowe and Goyder, 1983; Wilson, 1984; Davies, 1985; Greenberg, 1985; Warren, 1990). The most comprehensive study of environmental pressure groups and the media, to date, was conducted by Lowe and Goyder in 1983. The authors surveyed seventy-seven national voluntary groups involved with ecological issues between 1979 and 1980. Senior members of these groups were interviewed about a number of issues including: access to the media; membership; internal democracy; staff; relations with government departments; and co-operation between different environmental organizations. Lowe and Goyder's research suggested that environmental groups were becoming professional in dealing with the media; but what do we know about the relationship between environmental groups and the media in the 1990s?

**Environmental pressure groups: attempts to manage the agenda in the 1990s**

Since the 1970s, environmental pressure groups have become increasingly sophisticated in their dealings with the media and they have played an important role in keeping environmental issues on the agenda (Solesbury, 1976; Lowe and Goyder, 1983; Lowe and Morrison, 1984; Hansen, 1990). The increased professionalism of environmental groups is reflected in the widespread systematic monitoring of the media, particularly national newspapers, and in the growth in numbers of experienced staff responsible for dealing with media relations. In the past, pressure groups such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have organized stunts which have attracted a great deal of media attention. These stunts fitted in with the news values of journalists because they were both novel and dramatic (Greenberg, 1985). Jan McHarry, Senior Information Officer at Friends of the Earth, explained:

. . . certainly in the 1970s we were, maybe, seen as a pressure group on the fringes. Always very active and the press always wanted to know our reaction, our comments. But it was very much a passive waiting for them to come to us apart from us doing stunts and dressing up and things like that to actually attract the press. (Interview, 17 July 1989)

However, a major problem faced by environmental pressure groups in the 1990s is that the novelty and impact of their old approaches has been superseded. Although environmental pressure groups have much greater access to the media now, they need to be even more concerned about developing very clear strategies and about targeting different sections of the public in different media. And they need to be more selective about the material which they send to the media, particularly to environment correspondents for television news. As Lawrence McGinty, Science Editor for ITN, suggests:

What I think they're not actually quite so good at is picking the turning points in environmental coverage and what people think of the environment and knowing how to manipulate those. Those are very hard to do and they've done it to a certain extent behind the scenes but not through the media, like Jonathan Porritt writing Prince Charles's speech, or talking to him about it, offering suggestions, whatever it was. . . . But I think in their direct approaches the ease of access they've now got to the media actually makes it more difficult for them to be discriminating. (Interview, 17 January 1990)

Ian Breach, Environment Correspondent for BBC News, concurred.

. . . increasingly we're taking pictures from Greenpeace, or WWF [World Wide Fund for Nature], who are supplying broadcast format footage. You know,

they've now learnt that if they shoot stuff on Vitacam the broadcasting networks are increasingly happy to take it because it means we don't have to spend the money, although Greenpeace do sometimes charge. But . . . the environmentalist pressure groups are becoming increasingly media wise, so much so that, for a broadcaster, they're sending too much. . . They're not being selective, they're not realizing or they're ignoring if they know this — I'm sure a lot of them do — that I can't go to the newsdesk every other day with a Greenpeace originated story, or a Friends of the Earth originated story, or a World Wide Fund for Nature originated story; it just isn't plausible. (Interview, 27 November 1990)

Previous research indicates that environmental groups view national quality newspapers as the best vehicle for influencing public opinion and government policy. Lowe and Goyder (1983) found that the majority of the seventy-seven environmental groups surveyed made the most use of the national quality press. The authors found that 59 percent of the groups claimed to have received television coverage, 74 percent had received radio coverage and only 9 percent said that they had had no media coverage at all. The interviews carried out with representatives of environmental groups would seem to confirm this. For example Jan McHarry, Senior Information Officer at Friends of the Earth, maintained that it is much easier, less time-consuming and more reliable to wire out a press release than it is to try and gain direct television or radio coverage:

It's very easy to write a press release, fax it out and get it on all the press agencies and the wires and get that right round the world. . . Radio and television you're a lot more at the mercy of producer's schedules. . . TV the response time is a lot longer or you can spend all day out filming for a thirty-second clip. (Interview, 17 July 1989)

Greenpeace's media strategy is more narrowly focused than that of many environmental organizations. They gear themselves particularly to television news and to newspaper visuals, employing their own cameraman and photographer. As Chris Rose, director of Media Natura, maintains:

What Greenpeace are very good at is they've invented, if you like, a sort of morality play. . . that takes Greenpeace straight out of the editorial system of gatekeepers. . . It puts them into that sort of tabloid news and that's what headline news in television is about because it has to be thirty-second subjects, thirty-second visuals. . . . So I mean they're using the media in that way, deliberately restricting most of their input using that one visible bit that you can see, using television news, basically, and newspaper photographs. (Interview, 24 January 1990)

Given the increased media interest in environmental affairs, environmental groups need to rethink some of their strategies towards the media. For example, considerable opportunity for further exposure exists within radio, particularly regional radio. As Chris Rose rightly argues:

I think they ought to aim it more at radio because radio is cheap and they could actually get on radio a lot more. People listen to the radio when they're using it as a sort of recreation while they're doing something else so they actually do listen to the radio and they remember things much more on the radio, sometimes, than they do on television. . . . And I think they ought to spend a lot more time working on things like women's magazines which have a much longer life. If you get an article in a woman's magazine it might have a readership of twenty people because it might end up in a doctor's surgery, for example. (Interview, 24 January 1990)

Also, if environmental pressure groups are to obtain quality coverage then they need to be viewed by journalists as reliable and accurate. There is still some doubt among journalists about the claims of certain environmental groups, most notably Greenpeace. Nine out of the twelve journalists and broadcasters questioned about this claimed that they were mistrustful of Greenpeace. A typical comment was that of Richard North of the *Independent*, who claimed that he no longer spends time reading the Greenpeace literature that is sent to him:

In the end I stopped reading it altogether because I thought. . . while a bit of it will be right and it will all be for the greater good of mankind, substantially it will be wrong in its science or its evidence or its balance. (Interview, 15 March 1989)

Despite this general mistrust, Greenpeace still manages to obtain a huge amount of media coverage. Indeed, Greenpeace was one of the major sources for the *Karin B* and the seal virus stories. Rose suggests that the reason why many environment correspondents dislike Greenpeace is because news editors tend automatically to accept material from Greenpeace, bypassing them in the process:

They don't like Greenpeace and they don't like Greenpeace because Greenpeace goes past them. It gets straight onto the front page of the newspaper because the news editor will say I don't care whether you think this is news or not, that they're blocking this ship up the Thames, it looks like news as far as I'm concerned and the public will think it's news. (Interview, 24 January 1990)

Indeed Lucy Thorp, Press Officer at Greenpeace, concurred:

I think one of the problems used to be the environment correspondents felt, I think, that a lot of the stories that Greenpeace does are actually news stories and so what would happen is that we would send information about actions to the news desks. . . and it would bypass them. (Interview, 22 January 1991)

However, Friends of the Earth are generally thought to produce well researched and reliable reports. Indeed, their whole approach to the media is very different. Friends of the Earth operate by establishing firm contacts

with particular journalists through individual campaigners. Also the Press Office has less control over the information that is filtered through to the media and is more concerned with long-term information/education processes. Jan McHarry, Senior Information Officer at Friends of the Earth, claims: 'Friends of the Earth's reputation is actually based on doing a lot of research and having a lot of answers before we launch campaigns (Interview, 17 July 1989).

Environmental pressure groups need to devote more of their resources towards improving their strategies towards the media in the 1990s. Although most environmental pressure groups have very limited resources, and rely to a great extent upon membership subscriptions, they need to make media relations a top priority. Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have already implemented major public relations/media outreach strategies. In the last year their press offices have undergone considerable expansion and they have begun to target particular sections of the media, such as women's magazines. Lucy Thorp, Press Officer for Greenpeace, explained:

The department has changed from being one person to being five people.

Two years ago probably what we would do with any information that we'd have is send out a news release. Well we realized that that wasn't the best way of targeting the media. . . We're actually targeting specific media, depending upon what the story is. (Interview, 22 January 1991)

However, the present economic climate has forced some environmental organizations to cut back on the amount of resources devoted to media strategies. The financial position of environmental pressure groups raises the whole issue of the mobilization of resources, whether they be money, knowledge, skills or organizational factors. This aspect of the relationship between government and environmental groups has been surprisingly neglected. However, successful relations between government and environmental groups depend to a large extent on the amount of resources that they command and the extent to which their demands are seen as rational by government (Moodie and Studdert-Kennedy, 1970; McCarthy and Zald, 1982). Sociological research has found that the media tend to depend upon authoritative sources of information which usually have a sound economic base (Gandy, 1980). Non-official sources have to compete with official sources for media space and here limited resources are a major constraint.

### **The developing agenda of the 1990s**

The media go through cycles of coverage, feeding upon each other, but due to the scale of public concern it looks as if the environment is likely to continue to hold a high position on the political agenda in the 1990s.

But how will the media agenda unfold? First, my research suggests that over the past two years news values concerning environmental issues have changed. Environment correspondents in the 1990s will continue to find that environmental stories have a lower threshold. That is, they will not need to display all of the qualities that they previously had to include. However, environmental news stories rarely make headline news and much depends on the extent to which other social issues command greater political attention.

Second, a show business type approach will be used by many of the popular and mid-market papers, and by some television producers, to attract readers or viewers. This sort of approach is already evident, with actors or actresses presenting documentaries on environmental issues and show business personalities being used to back newspaper campaigns. For example, Susannah York presented the BBC 2 series *The North Sea*, and several show business personalities were used to back the *Daily Mail's* 'Save Our Seals' campaign.

Third, my research suggests that, for similar reasons, green consumerism will continue to be a major theme in environmental coverage, cutting across all sections of the media. Green consumerism fits into current news values which are concerned with immediately realizable solutions to the problems that we now face.

However, at the same time, environmental coverage will become increasingly politicized. Environmental issues will no longer be covered as though they were detached from the wider global political arena. Also, there might well be an increase in campaigning magazine programmes in environmental slots such as the BBC 2 *Nature* series (MacMillan, 1988). This new approach contrasts sharply with the old, soft, documentary-style natural history programme and provides more scope for a serious discussion of environmental issues (Salmon, 1988).

However, it is likely that in the future such new types of environmental programme will increasingly come under threat as a result of the government's restructuring of broadcasting. If free market forces prevail, broadcasters will be forced to maximize audience ratings, and because documentaries about environmental matters tend to attract small, specialized audiences they will inevitably suffer. Indeed, a recent report by Oxfam for the 'Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project' warns: 'Deregulation . . . threatens to cut off the life blood for environmental and current affairs documentaries, depriving British viewers of the very in-depth coverage that has helped stimulate public demand for change' (quoted in Lee, 1990).

The future communication of environmental issues will depend, to a large extent, upon the resources which the media and environmental organizations can command, which is in turn linked with the environment's perceived importance in mainstream political thinking and public agendas.



Environmental organizations will need to become even more adept at managing the news if the present level of environmental awareness is to be sustained.

## Notes

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1. Media Natura is a media charity which was established in 1988 to help conservation groups with their public relations activities. The organization operates a sponsorship scheme whereby media personnel donate their services at reduced rates.

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