

# Media tend to doomsay when addressing environmental issues

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A reporter takes notes during a demonstration for the enforcement of Kyoto Protocol. Credit: ItzaFineDay

This study, undertaken by researchers from the University of the Basque Country (UBC, Spain), analyses the role played by the media in creating and spreading a stance regarding the protection of the environment, sustainable development and natural heritage.

This research, published in the latest issue of the *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* (*Latin Journal of Social Communication* in English) proposes and performs an analysis of the dialectic strategies used by the daily press to treat environmental information. Jose Ignacio Lorente, a lecturer at the UBC and one of the researchers who participated in the project told SINC that the study was concerned with "the way in which social communication media, particularly news media, contribute to

creating and spreading social visions of sustainable development and the conservation and protection of the environment in general and natural heritage in particular".

The research team studied the information published in connection with the environmental summit held in Bali in 2007. Apart from this analysis, the researchers complemented this information with a survey carried out in Urdaibai, the Basque Country. The questions referred to the perceptions, attitudes and willingness to participate in mitigating the adverse effects of climate change, aspects in relation to the social representations identified in the analysis of the contents of the study.

The extensive analysis of the dialectics included an evaluation of the so-called news agendas, as well as framing procedures (the way in which the media determine how they will consider and publicly present information) and priming procedures (which ensure the relevance of certain aspects of the news that sustain the reasoning behind a given interpretation of the facts).

Lorente believes the conclusions of this study suggest that "the media make an active contribution to tackling the complexity of the sustainability crisis of the current model of development, by confining their interpretation to environmental problems, but also fail to consider the social, economic and cultural aspects of a production system based on growth and the massive exploitation of natural resources".

## **What Happens and What the Media Says**

According to the results of the study, the news agenda that the media developed regarding the Summit in Bali focused on scientific evidence of the global dimensions of climate change, the fact that its potentially devastating effects could be immediate and its anthropogenic nature. However, according to the researchers, this agenda "avoided addressing

the real reasons behind the political argument in detail, by means of a narrative strategy in which dramatising conflicts, threats and delays regarding CO2 quotas prevailed," becoming the top priority for the Bali Summit.

However, Lorente adds, "the emphasis the media placed on scientific evidence regarding the human nature of the causes for climate change was not linked to citizens' sphere of activity, despite fact that their everyday decisions and behaviour - transport, energy saving, recycling - account for 20% of the problem".

According to the research by the UBC, alarmist and catastrophist news focusing on the risk of natural disasters and the urgency of political and economic action "places the emphasis on the heroic efforts of abstract and distant individuals whose motives are not always clear". This approach, they say, appears to lack references to or be based on citizen's everyday life.

Furthermore, the prominence of the eco-efficient approach (based on expectations that techno-scientific development is enough to mitigate the effects of [climate change](#)) results in the media not covering the debate in connection with the social, economic and cultural model that citizens are willing to assume and share, reinforcing instead, according to Lorente, the perspective that our current way of life, production and consumption is the only option available when it comes to interpreting development and sustainability."

More information: José Ignacio Lorente; José Enrique Antolín; Francisco Javier Doblas. "La construcción mediática de lo ecológico. Estrategias discursivas en la información de actualidad". *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*. Número 64, páginas 315-327. 2009.

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