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The Media as an Arena for Environmental Politics

The media have an important role in defin-ing and constructing environmental issues as social problems. Media visibility is crucial in the process where environmental problems become part of political debate and decision-making.

There has been several ups and downs in the public discourse of environmental issues, which reflect not only the state of our physical environment but social, economical and cultural changes as well. This article explores some mechanisms that may explain these changes.

First, the appearance or disappearance of environmental issues in the public arena is dependent on individuals, groups and organizations which act as claim-makers of the problem. Environmental groups and 'critical intellectuals', usually scientists, have played a prominent role in the agenda-setting during the 60's and 70's. Now it seems that environmental organizations and groups have lost some of their power in the public discourse. Science as an institution, administration, as well as industry has gained a more prominent role in the agenda-setting process. Furthermore, the mass media that were very active in the late 80's, have become more reactive.

Secondly, public discussion on environmental issues is highly dependent on legitimacy institutions and practices. The media seem to be highly dependent on established institutions and experts as news-sources. On the other hand, different interest groups are making their claims plausible through the authority of science and with sophisticated media-strategies.

Thirdly, the role of the media in this process can be conceptualized in terms of frame and framing. Framing is a way of using linguistic and visual tools in the definition of environmental problems. Same events and issues can be framed in different ways which also contribute to different possible solutions to these problems.

Despite a minor backlash in the nineties, environmental issues have maintained their prominence in the public arena. They have, however, become more or less 'business as usual', problems among others. The media tend to frame environmental issues as abstract and distant threats or as disputes that belong to the realm of scientists and other experts, not to that of everyday activity and politics.