

Media and the Environment Introduction

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Introduction

Given the wide-ranging issues linked to climate changes, aspects arising from intersections between social, cultural, and natural environments have been taken up within most social sciences and humanities disciplines over the last few decades. In addition to this, the study of cultural and communicative aspects of environmental issues has also spawned new research areas such as the environmental humanities and environmental communication, each of which has their own conferences and journals. While the first of these largely grew out of anthropology and literary studies, the latter emerged from within the field of communication studies. Yet, work in both fields often draws on a somewhat shared pool of literature that critiques anthropocentrism and stark divisions between humans and the more-than-human.

These fields of study serve as important contexts for more recent interests in studying media and environmental issues. This is evident in the addition of journals and handbooks explicitly focused on media. *Media+Environment* (est. 2019) and *The Journal of Environmental Media* (est. 2020) are good examples, as is *The Routledge Handbook of Ecomedia Studies* (López et al., 2024). What is noteworthy regarding ecomedia, as the editors mention in the introduction to the handbook, is that this emerging field encompasses studies of both “ecologically oriented media texts and contexts” and “the ecological impacts of media” (López et al., 2024, p. 2). The concept of ecomedia thus represents an expansion

towards the materiality of media, which has been part of media studies over the years, but has largely been overlooked in relation to environmental issues.

One way to expand the notion of media is through Eskjær's (2021) division of environmental communication into three areas of study: 1) media in the environment; 2) the environment in the media; and, finally, 3) communication in and with nature. The first of these concerns the material aspects of media technologies, e.g., energy consumption and mining of rare minerals but also monitoring technologies embedded in ecosystems. While media in the environment is a relatively prominent area internationally, it remains a niche area within media studies in the Nordic countries (as also reflected in the submissions to this special issue). The second area concerns the representation of the environment and environmental issues in the media, e.g., in literature, popular culture, or journalism. While this may resemble traditional media studies, it is a field where communication is seen within a wide range of media, i.e., not only those of the public sphere. Finally, the third area – communication in and with nature – concerns the various ways in which more-than-human entities (animals, plants, etc.) communicate among themselves and with their surroundings. Although the three areas are somewhat distinct, their boundaries can sometime overlap; for example, the material presence of monitoring technologies in ecosystems also produces representations that help shape our understanding of the more-than human. Such representations may also draw on or include knowledge about how other species communicate. Such an interest underpins critiques of the anthropocentric character of much communication, e.g., journalism, and how this perpetuates damaging divisions (e.g., Lockwood, 2019).

Against this broad context, it is worth noting that most contributions to this special issue of *MedieKultur* on media and the environment (which we will return to below) fall within the second category: the environment in the media. Moreover, in terms of media content, more than half of the articles focus on journalism, although the article "The dual climate impact of news media", also includes the impact of media technology on the environment. Overall, it is encouraging to see the many contributions on journalism, as the environment receives relatively limited attention in the international field of journalism studies.

Whereas Nordic media studies traditionally focus on representations and media technological infrastructures in relation to the development of public spheres, this special issue illustrates how research in ecomedia and environmental communication broadens the concept of media. In addition to a wide range of media technologies, such as remote sensing via satellites, there is growing concern with materiality, both in immediate terms (e.g., electronic waste) and more broadly as modern epistemologies continue to shape the natural environment. However, traditional work within media, and journalism, studies – both in Scandinavia and elsewhere – has been relatively slow to engage with these issues, which mainly have emerged from environmental communication and the environmental

humanities. This may partly be explained by these fields' background in anthropology, literature, and eco-criticism.

This special issue on media and the environment grows out of the biennial meeting of the association of media and communication researchers in Denmark (SMiD) held at Aalborg University in Copenhagen in early May 2024. The theme of that meeting was "Media (and) sustainability: Crises, paradoxes and potentials". After the meeting, we circulated a rather broad call for papers to the conference participants and other interested researchers. The aim was to get a sense of research being conducted in Denmark and the Nordic region under the broad heading of media and the environment. As already noted, most contributions focus on media content and journalism (Agin & Karlsson; Zelenkauskaitė et al.; Frig; Horsbøl & Eskjær; Sarra; Roslyng et al.). Those not dealing with journalism cover fashion (Mishra & Sandberg), computer games (Fernandes), and municipal climate communication (Grønning & Henriksen). In the following, we will briefly introduce the contributions before concluding this introduction with a few summary and forward-looking remarks.

Journalism and the environment

One of the key issues in discussions about journalism and climate is about who gets to speak and how this may be skewed towards conventional sources and institutions (politicians, business leaders, and scientists). In the article "Who cites whom? The overrepresentation of male sources in the most shared climate change news stories", Zelenkauskaitė et al. investigate sourcing in the national broadcaster of Lithuania. Based on content analysis, they reach the conclusion that despite the availability of many female scientists, women remain underrepresented. In addition to that, there were very few "lay testimonies". As such, the article rightfully underlines how traditional sourcing patterns may restrict progressive and/or unconventional thinking about climate change.

The next two articles call our attention to how journalism negotiates the emergence of products that at some level address some of our challenges: The first, by Mette Marie Roslyng, Lars Pynt Andersen, Iben Bredahl Jessen, and Stinne Gunder Strøm, looks at journalism about plant-based milk, while the second, by Anders Horsbøl and Mikkel Eskjær, looks at the coverage of Sustainable Aviation Fuels. Both articles are analysing Danish journalism. In their article, "Between lifestyle and the politics of sustainability: Contesting milk alternatives in the media", Roslyng et al. examine the contested field of plant-based milk alternatives by looking at how the meanings of plant-based milk alternatives are constructed in Danish news media. Drawing on political discourse theory and sociocultural theories of consumption, they analyse 340 news articles across five years (2019-2023). The analysis delves into how dominant understandings of healthy and sustainable food emerge and how these are challenged within lifestyle discourses where identity is negotiated.

In “Flying green? Representing ‘sustainable aviation fuels’ in the Danish media” Horsbøl and Eskjær look at how journalism becomes part of constructing such fuels as a public phenomenon. Based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches to 209 journalistic texts, they inductively distil five major frames: technology, political-legislative, growth, climate optimistic, and climate critical. By looking at the spatial and temporal distribution and weight of these frames, as well as the related sources, they conclude that “the political-regulative, technology, and climate optimistic frames are the most prevalent, even across different public arenas”. This article, along with the two preceding ones, thus helps us understand the processes through which climate change, green consumption, and green technologies are given meaning within established journalism.

The next article, by Meri Frig and Maarit Jaakkola, “The dual climate impact of news media: The carbon footprint–handprint challenges in Nordic commercial news media organizations”, addresses the dilemma of environmental communication in general and climate change communication in particular by highlighting that communication technology itself is a source of greenhouse gas emissions. The article’s title effectively captures this dilemma. To a large extent, the public relies on media organisations to select, present, and explain complex climate change information (the so-called carbon handprint). However, in fulfilling this vital role, media organisations inevitably contribute to increasing carbon emissions (the so-called carbon footprint). Using qualitative data, the article examines how commercial Nordic news media navigate this dilemma by identifying three common challenges faced by all news organisations. While a carbon handprint is less straightforward to measure than a carbon footprint, media organisations aim to build credibility by demonstrating both environmental aspiration (talk the talk) and action (walk the walk).

Anthropogenic climate change arises from a complex mix of systemic, institutional, and personal actions. In “Climate responsibility in Finnish tabloid media”, Jenni Sarras investigates how the tabloid press assigns responsibility for both past and present climate change. It examines the evolution of attribution, tone, and content related to climate responsibility and finds that a significant shift from individual to institutional responsibility occurred between 2019 and 2023. This shift is partly explained by the introduction of new climate policies at national and international levels, such as national climate targets and the adoption of the European Climate Law (2021). By analysing tabloid news, the study makes an important contribution to understanding how news media frame climate responsibility through an emotional, human-interest style of reporting that highlights everyday life rather than focusing on political elites.

The next article, by Sol Agin and Michael Karlsson, looks at some of the voices lacking in the preceding articles, namely activism. In the article, titled “Ethos of news media vs social movements: An explorative study about changing attitudes towards climate change”, they conduct experiments to analyse how the perceived sender (newspaper or social movement) is related to, among other things, the construction of trust. In relation

to this, the article points at a potential for social movements to be more active in the dissemination of knowledge. More generally, the article usefully reminds us that the public discussion about climate change is made up of many competing voices.

Fashion, games, and strategic communication

While the articles discussed so far share an interest in journalism, the last three articles address sustainability and communication in divergent media and social spheres. As such, they document the diversity of media studies related to the environment. The first of these is “Style is an art form: The role of Instagram affordances in promoting sustainable fashion as a service”, by Adyasha Mishra and Helena Sandberg, who examine the digital communication strategies of thrift stores in India. Drawing on a series of interviews with thrift store owners on their communication practices on Instagram, the authors argue that specific platform affordances enable the promotion of fashion as a climate-aligned experience through affective language. Rather than merely selling a product, it is experience that are in focus, i.e., providing consumers with memorable and engaging interactions through creative communication. The article comprises a communication-focused contribution to our understanding of climate-related consumption practices, especially within the Global South, by showing how communication technologies mediate behavioural and cultural shifts that support (comparably more) climate-friendly practices.

In the article “Can the past save sustainability’s future? Retro video games as a circular economy of nostalgia”, Adalberto Fernandes is, against a broader context of gaming and sustainability, interested in how still-popular retro video games, on the one hand, can be seen as material circularity and, on the other, help (re-)construct human-nature relations. A key concern here is “the interplay between material and virtual practices within the circular economy of retro games”. Based on an ANT-inspired reading of a selection of games, and the argument that “that material circularity does not always correspond to a ‘symbolic circularity’ of meanings in favor of the environment”, Fernandes concludes that the “circular economy may be nostalgically dangerous, as it consumes fewer resources in game creation but exhibits an unsustainable relationship with nature”.

The last article in this section is Anette Grønning and Morten Ploug Henriksen’s “Bridging perspectives: Citizen perceptions of municipal climate communication and local climate action”, which examines a climate campaign in Odense Municipality in Denmark and how it is received by various demographic groups. In line with much climate communication centred on audiences, the authors argue that for climate communication to be effective, it must go beyond fact-based messaging and instead tap into preconceived values and emotions held by the audience. In emphasising how local communicators attempt to navigate tensions between scientific accuracy, political feasibility and citizen engagement in strategic climate communication, the article contributes to audience-cen-

tred climate communication and offers practical suggestions for tailoring effective climate communication to engage citizens.

Concluding remarks

This short introduction has hopefully made it clear that media and communication studies of the environment are alive, diverse, and developing in the Nordic region (and elsewhere). We are, of course, aware that the selection presented here is only a snapshot and that work in the Nordic region is much wider than what is presented in this special issue. Having said that, we also believe that there is much to be learned from delving into the articles presented here. Looking ahead, however, there is still much work to be done. One aspect is here a keener focus on aspects of materiality, which – as discussed above – is largely missing from our selection. In relation to this, there is much inspiration to find in the broader field of ecomedia. We could also add in more general terms that much media and communication studies, and certainly journalism studies, ought to engage more with work within environmental communication and the environmental humanities. Just as environmental issues reach into all spheres of social and cultural life, we need research that goes beyond established boundaries.

Open section

Another article that arose from the SMiD 2024 conference is the “Manifesto for transformist media scholars” written by Susana Tosca and Sara Mosberg Iversen. The manifesto invites media scholars to reflect on their role in contemporary society. It is an intentionally poetic and dialogical text that presents a collection of diverse voices. The manifesto puts forth seven key statements followed by responses from various scholars. The manifesto emphasises the importance of collective action, diverse perspectives, and the integration of human values in media research. In conclusion, it calls upon media scholars to engage in acts of resistance, creation, and solidarity, both on large and small scales.

The second article in the open section is Muñoz Morcillo’s article “The network of meanings constructed around the hijab in YouTube videos in Spain between 2015 and 2021”. Based on a discourse analysis of 20 videos with the greatest number of interactions and six creator interviews, religious and cultural focal points are identified around which this network revolves. Among the main ideas observed is how the hijab, in dialogue with fashion trends that emerge on social networking sites, highlights the cultural hybridisation experienced by converts and first- and second-generation Muslim women born or raised in Spain.

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