



## People and the Planet 2013 Conference Proceedings

This article was first presented at the *People and the Planet 2013 Conference: Transforming the Future*, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, 2-4 July.

All articles published in this collection have been peer reviewed.

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Title: Neglected and Partial News: A Probe into the Reporting of Latin American Environment  
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Publisher: Global Cities Research Institute, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia  
Year: 2013  
Editor(s): Paul James, Chris Hudson, Sam Carroll-Bell, Alyssa Taing

Series URL:

<http://global-cities.info/news-events/conferences-forums/conferences-proceedings>

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# Neglected and Partial News: A Probe into the Reporting of Latin American Environment

ANTONIO CASTILLO

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**Abstract:** In the 1990s, news coverage of environmental stories flourished in Latin American journalism. It was, however, short lived. The beginning of the 21st Century brought bad news for the environmental ‘paper round’. Publications closed, green newspaper supplements were discontinued and television and radio began to move away from environmental stories. This has produced two striking results. First, journalists from most Latin American mass media outlets were devoid of the expertise and will, needed to engage with environmental stories. Second, the consumers of such media were unable to gain access to information—or be sufficiently socialized—on the many environmental problems and threats that would, sooner or later, come to affect them.

The neglected story of the environment is also an incomplete one. When stories exist, they are stories that leave more questions than answers. Cases abound. Environmental justice for example has become a central issue in the region. But despite this centrality, Latin American journalism has been unable to tell a story that is fair. As outlined in this paper, and, based on first-hand experience, the struggle for environmental justice has been framed as deviant. And, they are failed stories. They don’t have context. They are fragmented. They don’t encourage a dialogical environment. They don’t prompt debate in the public sphere. They don’t educate. It is a news agenda full of ‘natural disasters.’

This paper zooms in and out, attempting to take stock of what is now happening in the land of magical realism, the land that has given us so many brilliant journalists, but so far has failed to give us enlightened environmental reporters.

**Keywords:** Latin America, journalism, environment, ecology, environmental justice, environmental journalism

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## 1. Introduction

Latin America is a region with vast environmental and ecological systems. These systems are intimately connected to the socio-cultural traditions and livelihoods of many rural societies, including indigenous and small peasant communities. In the last few years, powerful national and transnational economic interests have put this habitat, and its people, at high risk. From the privatization of water to the indiscriminate exploitation of ancient forest, the environment has become a theatre of conflict between small rural and indigenous communities and

powerful corporations and wealthy investors.

The struggle for the environment—or ‘environmental justice’ as it will be characterized in this paper—fought by indigenous communities, peasant leaders and green activists, has been a long neglected and ill-reported story. These are largely peaceful community actions that the media has chosen to frame by the prisms of ‘illegal’, ‘violent’ and even ‘terrorist’ activities. As Salazar suggested in his paper on climate change, the environment has been ‘ideologically framed in the mass media’ (2013, p. 1). It is an ideological frame constructed against the backdrop of neoliberal economic policies and political structures tainted by corruption, systemic problems, political instability and short-term policies.

In this fateful backdrop, a great number of governments across the region—whatever their ideological persuasion or political allegiances—have left the environment and their habitats to the mercy of the free market. It is a predatory market, which values private financial accumulation over that of environment justice. Ecuador and Bolivia are the only countries in Latin America that recognize the rights of the environment in their respective constitutions.

## **2. Reassessing the Latin American environmental news**

Arguably journalism is at the epicentre of the environmental question. It is a global question with immense local repercussions. If media scholars have to be brought to this debate, one must say that journalism is a mediator in this the environmental conversation. It mediates a conversation involving endless themes—scientific, socio-economic, political and cultural issues, among many others. Needless to say, this seems to be a titanic demand for the humble profession of journalism. It is even more demanding when one must consider that people’s knowledge and understanding of the problems and threats faced by our environment come from the media.

Media coverage of environment has had a rather bumpy trajectory. Hansen (1991) and the very productive Hannigan (2002) remind us that the coverage of environmental news had two decades of splendor—the 1960s and 1970s. This coincided with the rise of ground breaking social, political and cultural movements. However, these two decades became a flash in the pan of environmental coverage. From then on, as these two scholars argue, the news reporting of environment has had an erratic development.

Curiously enough, Latin America’s environmental reporting didn’t peak during the 1960s and 1970s, as happened in the United States and Europe. Undoubtedly the primary concern of Latin American journalism in this volatile period—like that of Asia and Africa—lay with covering the extraordinary social and political developments found across the continent. Indeed, Latin American journalists only began to look at the environment as a source of news in the early years of the 1990s. Behind this interest rests the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or *Eco 92 Gathering* in Rio de Janeiro. It was an event that coincided with the end of a number of military dictatorships that had darkened Latin America over the proceeding twenty years. Freed from the demanding news landscape of post-dictatorship democratization, media organizations saw the environment as the fresh news agenda. People were exhausted by news about missing people, torture, exile and about men in uniforms. They wanted something new. And environmental coverage—in the context of the so-called transition to democracy—became a trendy theme.

In the 1990s, magazines exclusively dedicated to the environment were published; television channels and radio stations began producing, screening and broadcasting news and documentaries on the environment. It has to be said that they were—to use journalism lingo—soft stories. They didn't confront the hard reality of major environmental problems. But at least, it encouraged people to examine their relationship with their surroundings. Argentina, Brazil and Mexico led the wave of environmental publications in the region. The first specialized magazines and newspaper 'green supplements' were published in these countries; these were born from the major media systems in the region. Unfortunately, this surge of environmental journalism didn't last long. Sooner rather than later, media proprietors reached a common conclusion—the environment didn't sell. Several 'green publications' folded in the early years of the 21st century. A study conducted by González and Manasanch (2009) showed that in Argentina, once a leading force in environmental news reporting, the so-called 'green supplements' began a rapid extinction from the national newspapers. Today, Argentina's environmental problems have 'no structured presence in print, radio or television' (González and Manasanch 2009, p. 100–1). Moreover, there is only one exception, the left leaning *Página 12* newspaper which publishes the only environment newspaper supplement in the country. In Mexico, ecological themes are not regarded as important as others in the agenda despite being home to one of the largest media environments in the world. As González Cruz points out, ecological stories are marked by their 'irregularity and fugacity' (2007, p. 51).

In a neo-liberal economic setting—embraced at different degrees by the majority of Latin American countries—the vertical economic integration and appropriation have permitted regional and international media entrepreneurs to widely invest in the natural resources sector. They own, or are the main investors in a number of sectors, including; mining, water, forestry, fishing, agriculture and agro-business. As a result, the focus of news coverage tends to discourage news organizations and journalists in pursuing a more aggressive environmental news agenda (Jukofsky 2000).

Academic studies examining the environmental news agenda have reached some important conclusions (González Alcaraz 2012, González Cruz 2007, González and Manasanch 2009, Velásquez González 2007). The first suggests that the media have significant influence over people's knowledge, understanding and societal engagement with environmental issues. For Latin American journalism this conclusion points to a major deficit: the lack of a dialogical dimension. They are stories that don't have the attention-grabbing factor. They don't elicit a public dialogue. No wonder the great majority of Latin America media consumers remain profoundly ill-informed of the environmental problems that affects them. And this is indeed the root of the public environmental passivity and inaction shown in this region besieged by long-term ecological problems. The second illustrates that the media and journalism are mediator and facilitator—the interface—between science, public policy and emerging ecological actions. In the great majority of cases, the media are unable to explain how the destruction of the environment affects them directly or what they can do to be part of the solution. In politics, the media are called upon to socialize people with democratic norms. When it comes to the environment this dialogical and socializing role is neglected. Environmental communication (Hansen 2011), understood as the dialogue where newsmakers, scientists, policy makers and public opinion become engaged, is fundamental in generating and telling environmental stories.

The third significant conclusion infers that environmental news stories are heavily dependent, in terms of their production and dissemination, on the ideological demands and financial

interests of the media proprietors. As is the case with other ‘sensitive’ news agenda—political and financial for example—journalists have socialized and internalized these demands, making them highly cautious when it comes to reporting environmental stories. They have socialized a journalistic discursive practice that legitimizes and defends the ideological views of their owners. As Mexican scholar Edith González Cruz observes, journalists have internalized the idea that national and transnational financial interests use their financial power to silence information that may affect them (2007).

Some of these conclusions add-on to the ones arising from a major study conducted by Global News and the Foundation Konrad Adenauer in 2008. The study examined the press coverage of environmental problems—specifically climate change—in seven Latin American countries. The countries chosen were Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela. Ultimately, it drew attention to several disturbing trends. First of all, to the quantity of environmental stories disseminated during the 32 days of the study. The investigation exposed the little presence of ecological news, only 214 out of a total of 40,079 stories published during this period dealt with environmental issues. Furthermore, of the 214 items, 75 per cent were short-hard news stories and 14 per cent were opinion pieces. What this finding suggests is that short-hard news stories and opinion pieces are partially filling the immense space that investigative stories should be filling instead. It also suggests that most journalists in the region, at least in the mainstream mass media, lack the intellectual depth to cover environmental stories. Moreover when they ventured into environmental issues, reporters tended to resort to what Salazar called ‘recycled scientific data’ (2013). Essentially it is a quick approach—journalists are seduced by the most alarmist findings that swiftly become the news peg, the headline, the teaser, the lead and the angle of the story. As Salazar (2013) said they became decontextualized, shallow and alarmist news stories. This is a similar critique that Velázquez González (2007) made to the media in Venezuela. For example, Velázquez González (2007) observed that, environmental stories are covered as long as there is a catastrophe or an emergency.

### **3. Environmental justice and journalism**

Apart from a few exceptions, the majority of Latin Americas existing ecological crises, such as the devastating effect of extractive mining, indiscriminate deforestation, water privatization or transgenic agriculture, rarely becomes news. In the majority of the cases powerful financial groups and individuals don’t want these problems debated in the public sphere. Furthermore, when this debate is not happening, it is the communities most affected by this crisis that congregate in squares, at the doors of transnational agro-business companies or take control of the roads where massive forest company trucks move along with their heavy load. These actions are part of the struggle for ‘environmental justice.’ It is the struggle for the care and democratization of limited environmental resources. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA 2013) defines environmental justice ‘as fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin or income with respect to development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.’

This is a struggle that has become a social conflict in most Latin American countries. Just one case is the struggle by ancient Bolivian communities for the right to quínoa. This has been the staple food for highland indigenous communities for centuries. Salazar (2013) points that that quínoa has become even more expensive than in some developed countries where this

product has become trendy. In developing Bolivia, a kilo of quinoa costs around AU\$4, in developed Australia it costs AU\$12. The minimum salary in Bolivia is AU\$3,000 and in Australia is AU\$20,000.

When it comes to forestry, the major news for this sector is the struggle of indigenous people fighting to prevent the destruction of their forest resources (Galindo 2002). Torres and Nauman are the co-directors of Journalism to Raise Environmental Awareness (PECE in Spanish). The search for environmental justice is happening throughout the region. In Bolivia there have been demonstrations against the construction of the Amazon highway planned to cross through the Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park. Indigenous people oppose the highway arguing it would destroy indigenous livelihood by increasing deforestation and the presence of drug traffickers in the area (CIFOR's Latin American Forest Update). In Mexico, Cheran Purepecha indigenous people are fighting against drug cartels logging illegally in their land. In Brazil large infrastructure projects such as Belo Monte seems to be setting some potentially worrisome precedents in limiting indigenous rights (Butler 2011).

They are conflicts that the mainstream and hegemonic mass media have embraced and constructed as deviant actions. Peaceful street marches, square gatherings and road sittings have been reported and framed as illegal activities, as criminal actions and even—as is the case of the struggle by the Indigenous in Chile, Bolivia, Mexico and Ecuador—as terrorist movements. This is a media attempt to criminalize the fight for environmental justice. This is a narrative useful and instrumental to the neo-liberal perception of the environment. More frequently than not, the leaders for environmental justice are constructed as 'perpetrators' instead of 'victims' of the external financial and political intervention in their habitat. This is precisely what the media in Chile, for example, have done with the legitimate claims by indigenous communities in the south of this long and lean country. The south is an environmentally fertile and culturally rich region, where the forest industry, hydroelectric companies and agro-animal exporting-enterprises have landed without any major problems. The permissive neo-liberal governments that have ruled this country since the end of the military dictatorship of General Pinochet (1974–89) have been unwilling to impose legislation able to protect the environment. And when the governments are not willing to protect and promote environmental justice, it is the people who take the lead.

In the south of Chile, the Mapuche indigenous community has taken this lead. The Mapuche (*mapu* meaning people, *che* meaning land) are the original inhabitants and custodian of this region called La Araucanía. They have lived here for thousands of years. As I said in an article, the Chilean commercial media, controlled by some of the wealthiest entrepreneurs in the country have transformed the Mapuche community from mythical heroes to rural terrorists (Castillo 2008). In this context, very little has been reported about the savage destruction of their habitat. Millions of hectares of culturally significant native forest have been slashed and replaced by 'industrial' timber. The forest has also been slashed to allow commercial animal exploitation. Very little has been reported about the close connection between the destruction of this habitat and the increasing poverty level experienced by the Mapuche community. Most of them have been forced to abandon their land (Castillo 2008).

One of the largest forestry companies seizing Mapuche land belongs to the Matte Group. One of the most powerful Chilean economic conglomerates, the Matte Group was one of the major and most loyal supporters of the military dictatorship of General Pinochet. It was a well-rewarded loyalty. The gates to the exploitation of Mapuche land were widely open, the

wealth grew and the political clout strengthened. The Group's financial and political clout have been neither questioned nor challenged by the post-dictatorship governments. And the Group has media muscles too. No wonder that during the last few years of Mapuche struggle against the exploitation of their ancestral land, the mainstream media have echoed the account of the Matte Group. Company officials have insisted that these actions have been causing major financial losses. Actually the financial figures don't substantiate this claim. As a matter of fact independent data shows the company has had a steady rise in earnings.

The other persistent call made by the forestry company and echoed by the mainstream media, relates to the 'need' to increase the military presence in the area. The government has been swift in responding to these calls. Over the last few years, I bore witness to a considerable build-up of police in the region. These heavily armed police forces resemble that of a military force. 'These companies are doing very well, while the government is militarizing the repression against Mapuche people,' said Arturo Millahual in an interview conducted in the city of Concepción, around 600 kilometres south of the Chilean capital Santiago (Interview 2011).

The struggle for environmental justice is not only about the land, but it is also about the water. The construction of the Bio-Bio river hydroelectric dam in Mapuche land was actively resisted by the local communities and also by environmentalists. However it was not the well-documented environmental damage caused by the electric company that made headlines. It was the resistance to it. The hegemonic media quickly disseminated footages of 'violent actions' committed by the local communities. The media have also neglected to probe into the politics of the water. A huge story. In Chile this natural resource is privately owned. In fact, private companies and wealthy individuals own 90 per cent of the water. Three companies, including the Spanish electric company Endesa and large agro-fruit exporting corporations, have taken control of Chile's water. This was possible to a 1981 law decree introduced by the former military dictator General Pinochet. Chile was—according to a report by the NGO Chilean Sustainable Programme—the first country in the world to make water a resource that can be financially exchanged; it could be sold and bought (Larraín and Schaeffer 2012). According to Larraín and Schaeffer (2012), 85 per cent of water for people's consumption is used for commercial purposes, principally in the export animal sector controlled by private business.

Water is a scarce resource in the north of Chile. And in the province of Limari, a fertile land controlled by powerful transnational fruit exporting companies, the struggle for the water has escalated in the last few years. Limari, located around 400 kilometres north of Santiago, has experienced in the last few years a decrease in snow falls in the Andes. Rain is scarce in this part of Chile. It is the melted snow that feeds into the rivers and dams. One of the leaders of the peasant movement in the north of Chile is Mirtha Gallardo. A tall, dignified woman, Gallardo has appealed to the media on many occasions to examine the human problem caused by access to the water. '*Campesinos* [translated to mean 'peasants'] can't have access to water and their small scale agriculture is dying,' she told me in an interview in Ovalle, the regional capital city of this province (Interview 2012). Furthermore, she told me an extraordinary story that encapsulates the struggle for the water. In a meeting held with some of the CEOs of the fruit transnational companies operating in Limari Mirtha, she (and the community more broadly) was informed that the water was designated for irrigation, and that,

'this is the priority, the rest, what is left, can be used for the population to consume' (Interview 2012).

In any part of the world, this extraordinary statement would have been subject to media scrutiny. But it didn't happen here. Mirtha—aware of media's power to disseminate information—showed me her book with the names of hundreds of journalists. 'When I called them to invite them to visit our communities to show them that now we have to buy water, nobody was interested,' she told me. 'The only reporters were members of the alternative media and some citizen journalists.' And while she appreciated their interest, the fact is that the hegemonic media are still setting the agenda. It is not television, it is not radio, it is not the Internet; it is the traditional commercial mass media that set the news agenda in Chile.

I travelled to Limari to research a book on the terrible conditions experienced by *temporeras*—women season fruit workers—who travel along the country following the fruit harvest. They work mainly for fruit transnational companies. Cheap labour. But this is another story to be told on another occasion. The story to be told here was an accidental one. Not the story, but the fact that I was lucky to arrive during a badly media reported Goliath and David legal trial. It was a case in 2011–12, involving the giant Mining Los Pelambres and members of the small rural community of Los Caimanes, around two hours south from Ovalle.

Los Pelambres is a Chilean-British mining giant listed on the FTSE 100. One of the main shareholders is the Luksic family, the wealthiest clan in Chile founded by the late Adrónico Luksic, once one of the wealthiest men in the world as reported by Fortune Magazine. Held in Ovalle, this trial, was the latest chapter in the 10 year struggle of the Los Caimanes' community against the enlargement of 'El Mauro'—a tailing-dam built by Minera los Pelambres. The tailings-dam is the biggest in Latin America, and third biggest in the world. It holds 2,060 million of tonnes of water and mining gold and copper waste. To construct the dam underground water was diverted, leading to an 80 per cent loss of water in the valley. This was a disaster for the subsistence agriculture, the livelihood of an economically disadvantaged local peasant community. The mining company has been found responsible for the contamination of drinking water. An independent study found high levels of toxic metals in the water causing stomach ulcers, lung cancers, infertility, and other health problems. 'There have also been children with birth defects and even losses during pregnancy' (Maria Vilches, Organizational Leader, Committee for Drinking Water, Interview 2012).

The trial against the community, a trial that I attended in early December 2012 in the city of Ovalle, was brought against the lawyers representing the community and against Cristian Flores, the leader of the movement. The lawyers were accused of financial fraud and Flores of 'illicit association.' The legal case had all the ingredients of a newsworthy story. It had all the key news values that drive the decision making of journalists. However, the case was scarcely reported by the mainstream Chilean news media. During the trial the media had full access. However, the lack of mainstream journalists was evident. Maria Vilches (Organizational Leader, Committee for Drinking Water, Interview 2012) told me: 'these kinds of protests are silenced by the media. We have rarely been approached to tell our story.'

As a first hand observer of the media coverage of this case, I saw only one journalist from the local newspaper *El Ovallino* and one reporter from an independent French news organization. The media contingent was also made up by a couple of citizen journalists. 'It seems the Chilean media don't want to report this massive story,' told me the French journalist Elif Karakartal (Interview, 2012). She was surprised by the lack of interest in a story that had, as she said, 'global repercussions.' Indeed it was a massive story that was subjected to massive

neglect. In a conversation with the reporter from the newspaper *El Ovallino*, a young newly graduated journalism graduate, he expressed his surprise by the lack of interest in the case. 'Perhaps it is too far from Santiago to come to Ovalle,' he said. Most of the Chilean media are based in the capital Santiago; 45 minutes flight to the airport of La Serena, a quaint city located 100 kilometres north from Ovalle. No excuses there. The trial ended on December 20, 2012 and all the accused was absolved, including Christian Flores. The story made it into *El Ovallino*, into the French media and that was all. Nothing was reported in the agenda setting media.

Examining early stories about this case, what was reported was the 'criminal angle' of this story. Agenda setting newspapers such as *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* framed this case as the confrontation between the police and local activists. It also focused on police raids to the houses of community leaders. Examining these stories, there was a clear pattern. The activists and community leaders were frequently portrayed as the cause of the problem and therefore the police action was necessary and even desired. It is not hard to understand why the local media ignored a story with international impact, as the French journalist suggested. As mentioned earlier, the Chilean commercial media—as is the case for most of the Latin America—is an intricate web of financial interests where media become one of their key hegemonic tools. This was evident when the Chilean Channel 13 (partially owned by the Luksic family) censored the screening of the documentary 'El Mauro'—an exposé of the environmental problems provoked by the mining company and the health troubles suffered by some members of Los Caimanes' community. The media did not even pick up the public statement, April 29, 2012, signed by several grassroots organizations. In part of the statement the signatories: 'demand true information about this problem and the causes behind it.' The statement went on to single out the media. It encouraged people to 'demand the end of the media censorship, silence, partial truth and straight lies.'

It is perhaps the pack mentality—the newsroom socialization—that tends to impact on the ability of journalists to see the long term and the global impact of environmental problems. It is also the group mentality that prevents them taking risks to explore the unreported stories, and explore them from different angles. For example, environmental destruction, financial appropriation and exploitation have been systematically reported as physical manifestations. But it goes beyond that. The environment is a human right, the right of every human being to enjoy the environment they live in. And when this human right is violated, the media should be at the forefront denouncing it, as it has denounced other manifestations of human rights violations, like torture for example. Perhaps, journalism needs to revisits already socialized concepts that tend to be incorporated into their story telling process. For example, 'natural disasters' is a concept that the media used as a default to speak about droughts in Australia or flooding in Thailand. These environmental manifestations perhaps need a new journalistic narrative, how about if journalists report them as 'human disasters'? Journalists are quick adopters of official terminologies. From the 'axis of evil' to 'weapons of mass destruction,' journalists hurried by the news cycle resort to them with gusto. No questions asked. Perhaps it is time journalists dare to explore concepts that reflect the urgency of the environmental problem. After all it is 'a new ghost that meanders around the world' (Szerszynski and Urry 2010, p. 1).

A fundamental principle in journalism practice is objectivity. It is a tenet that has been widely questioned by media scholars and also by journalists themselves. Objectivity is a straight jacket that resembles neutrality and has very little validity when journalism serves audiences that are not objective (Iskander, Interview 2008). Against this backdrop one must agree with

Salazar (2013) when he observes that journalism is highly responsible for the lack of consensus among citizens over the complex reality of climate change. Certainly this can be extrapolated to the lack of consensus on who is responsible for the environmental destruction. As Salazar (2013) also said, with very few exceptions, the Latin American media don't generate environmental stories. They are usually produced by international news agencies, mainly from the United States and Europe, and then they literally 'copy and paste' without any effort to contextualize them within the realm of the local environmental challenges. Without the local angle, the local audience perceives them as 'far away' problems. They are problems that the audience can't make any personal or local connection to. As Nisbet (2009) has suggested, people can't connect their lives with environmental problems when they don't understand the causes behind, for example, climate change. Furthermore, as one editor of a major Chilean daily newspaper noted to me, 'Look we have to admit we don't have scientific expertise, we don't have any training on how to cover the environment, so it is easier to just copy the wire service' (Interview 2012). These comments are well conceptualized by the work José Alcoceba Hernando (2004) who stresses the lack of appropriate journalism training to cover the science of the environment. He points out:

'The lack of a specific formation doesn't allow journalists to be able to manage and report environmental science. This is the reason that most journalists opt to select catastrophes and natural disasters instead of covering environmental stories that are perhaps less striking but far more important' (p. 42).

Indeed the Chilean editor made a *mea culpa* when we spoke in a café nearby the headquarters of the newspaper in Santiago,

'Most of the so-called local environmental stories we publish are covered when there is a rally against an industrial proposal regarded by the local community as a threat to their livelihood, for example the Freirina story; we have great visuals and confrontation between the police and protestors. We mentioned briefly the reasons for the protest, but our coverage was mainly about the confrontation' (Interview 2012).

After all, as he said, journalists are attracted by 'disasters' and this also applies to environmental stories. 'They have impact,' he said. 'Flooding, drought and weird climate features are the stories people want to read about.' As he said 'they want to know how many people lost their houses or even how many have died.' Little has changed, it would seem, since Galtung and Ruge observed in an article in 1965, that the likelihood of any event becoming news is directly related to the negative impact of that event. This is a point that Hannigan (2002) also explores in his work. He sustains that environmental problems are framed as 'social dramas' provoked by disasters. Certainly the pictorial spectacle is easier to narrate and more visually striking, than a backgrounder or an analysis of the ecological factors behind these disasters. And this striking images sell. There is no doubt that environmental stories are neither demanded nor consumed by audiences. As mentioned earlier, they are stories that are at the margins of the national concern. Edith González Cruz, a scholar who analyzed the ecology and journalism in Mexico, said media proprietors don't fancy ecological themes. They suppose that if 'environment is a product that people don't demand, don't consume, there is not much point to invest in it' (2007, p. 48).

## **Conclusion**

Environmental stories are neglected in the majority of the cases in the Latin American mainstream media. They are also partially reported. Despite a strong presence in the 1990s the decline of environmental coverage has been steady. There are multiple factors that explain this poor news coverage. Perhaps the central explanation is that audiences tend to see the environment as a marginal problem in their lives. In a region defined by huge economic disparity and poverty, the environment doesn't occupy a central position in the news demand of the population. For some, this is due to the on-going fragmentation, de-contextualization and scattered approach to environmental news by the major outlets. Moreover, some have observed, that what little coverage there is, lacks depth and it is regarded as a marginal theme in the news cycle. It is certainly the case that the media have constructed the problem of climate change as merely an environmental story, neglecting to position it as a political and cultural matter. They are intrinsically connected, a connection that seems outside of the journalism radar.

Another important reason can be found in the process and framing of environmental stories. As mentioned earlier, environmental stories tend to be seen by the media through the prism of stories of catastrophe and emergencies. They are also regarded as stories more connected to crime, violence and anti-social activities. It is fair to say that there is sense of criminalizing the environmental struggle of local indigenous communities and peasant movement. As Alcaraz (2009) rightly points out, environmental topics achieved a high level of newsworthiness when there is a social conflict, such as mobilizations of social groups that reject the environmental contamination or degradation or denounce health damage.

There is, however, good news among the bad. With the advent of the Internet, the media landscape has experienced—as in many other parts of the world—major vicissitudes. While the hegemonic power of the traditional, commercial and capitalists media is still a reality and still sets the news agenda; there is a slow process of media democratization in the region. A new, innovative, daring and exciting form of journalism—at civic, community, indigenous and fringe level—has occupied the digital world. From a humble position, it is attempting to fill an enormous gap in environmental reporting left by the region's hegemonic mass media. Through the eyes of victims, these new digital voices are telling the story of the Latin American environment. These are stories where the people can see them at the end of the environmental impact, an impact that is felt in their day-to-day experience. They are stories of local events and struggles. They are stories for environmental justice.

It is the counter hegemonic media that is taking the role of watchdog for the many environmental predicaments. The struggle waged by the indigenous, rural communities and activists for the democratization of the natural resources have found a stage from where to communicate their voices. The news agenda of the environment in Latin America is wide and rich. It includes community efforts to protect their environment, their access to information, forest management, traditional knowledge, gender equity, fair trade, land tenure and self-determination, among many others. It is now the role of the media to engage with them.

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