



Framing forest conservation in the global media: An interest-based approach☆



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to understand if analytical theory as used in forest policy analysis can contribute to explaining how global media reports about a contested issue like forest conservation are framed. It therefore takes an actor and interest-based approach on framing. The empirical study is based on 129 media articles on forest conservation published in international print media, TIME and International Herald Tribune between 1990 and 2004. The results indicate that journalists are in a prime position: on the one hand, dominantly framing problems and, on the other hand, acting like a gatekeeper deciding on the visibility and standing of other actors. In their framing, journalists have assigned the role of causers mainly to the political-administrative system (PAS) and enterprises and the role of the helper as well to the PAS but furthermore to NGOs and individuals. Attention paid to media stars addressing forest conservation issues appears as a strategy to increase the news value of the articles. Except for journalists, actors with standing use the chance to present themselves in the role of helper only to a limited extend and they make even more seldom use of the speaker position to point towards a specific causer.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, forest conservation has been an important subject of political discourses not only at the sub-national or national level but also in global politics (Arts et al., 2010: 64). The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) forest negotiation in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, strongly addressed this issue leading to a confrontation between developing and developed countries about responsibilities for forest conservation (Humphreys, 2001). Under the auspices of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (1995–1997), the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (1997–2000) and the United Nations Forum on Forests (2000 to present) were founded consecutively and represented international forest policy dialogue addressing the issue of forest conservation. However, this subject was not limited to the area of forest focused policies but was also addressed by the broader international forest regime, also comprising international institutions with a particular focus on forests, e.g. the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate change (UNFCCC) or the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) (Córdoba

et al., 2011). These international institutions paid particular attention to biodiversity loss and deforestation, recognizing the destruction and degradation of tropical forests as an extremely important global issue (Riswan and Hartanti, 1995). Environmental and forest issues are amongst those gaining attention in the media (Krumland, 2004; Kleinschmit et al., 2007; Park, 2013; Kleinschmit and Sjöstedt, 2014). The issue of forest conservation is central as it can be regarded as being characteristic of the general dispute between economic development and conservation in media reporting worldwide (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). In general terms, media is regarded as highly influential and powerful (Bennett and Entman, 2001). However, how power is understood to play out in the media depends on the perspective taken. Some scholars regard media as a communication platform where information and arguments are exchanged and thereby contribute to opinion and will formation. Hence, from this perspective, media builds the prerequisite for (deliberative) democratic policy making (Habermas, 2006). Though Kleinschmit identified in her empirical study that media cannot live up to the high ideal of serving as a platform for deliberation, she argues that this can be regarded as a normative goal presenting the direction in which to go (Kleinschmit, 2012). In contrast, other scholars perceive media as an actor in its own right with the power to assign a specific meaning to a particular issue and allowing the promotion of certain stakeholders over others (Krott, 2005; Park, 2013). Consequently, media can be assumed to assert political power specifically in political conflicts.

Different studies investigate the role of media in forest conflicts (e.g. Kleinschmit et al., 2007; Gritten et al., 2012). Gritten et al. (2012) argue

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that media's important role in forest conflicts is underlined by the significant investment of international forest companies in public relations strategies to reduce effects of conflict issues on public opinion. They illustrate the power of media in forest conflicts through the example of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Indonesia using CNN International to target APRIL (Gritten and Kant, 2007; Raitzer, 2008). Gritten et al. (2009) state that environmental conflicts are often played out in the media, where the message relayed can worsen the situation. How a conflict is framed will go a long way to determining its intensity (Gritten et al., 2012). The authors argue therefore that it is important to determine how a conflict is framed, and to understand the motivation for this framing.

This paper aims to understand how framing of forest conservation is motivated in global media reporting. The basis of the research concept is the forest policy analysis approach developed by Krott which is nested in a rational choice based analytical theory (Krott, 2005). The major assumption of his analytical approach is that interests are the most important factor in describing political processes as actors act according to their interests which designate "the benefits the individual or group can receive from a certain object, such as a forest" (Krott, 2005: 8). Following this approach, the specific aim of this paper is to understand if analytical theory can contribute to explaining how global media reports about a contested issue like forest conservation are framed.

The paper concentrates on actors with media appearance (standing) in global media reporting and on framing (highlighting specific aspects and downplaying others) of forest conservation issues. It starts by outlining the theoretical design of the study, which is anchored in media studies, policy analysis studies and the frame concept. Research questions are outlined in the final part of this section. In the following section, the empirical design is introduced describing in detail how the quantitative content analysis is conducted. In the results section, actors with standing and their framing are presented. The role of the media is particularly highlighted. Finally, the research findings are discussed and conclusions drawn.

2. Theoretical framework

This paper is based on media and policy theories. Media logic, forest policy analysis and framing are introduced in the following subsections. Finally a research model designed from the three theories is described.

2.1. Media logic

Media plays a relevant role as a public arena for environmental and forest conflicts. In the process of creating news, specifically with reference to conflicts, journalists rely on various sources with different social positions and interests (Conrad, 1999; Ferree et al., 2002; Krumland, 2004; Liebler and Bendix, 1996). But media has much broader influence on society beyond the mere transportation of information. As Elliott (1972) highlighted, media communication has a logic of its own. Bennett however identifies a set of three different norms influencing (political) news: (i) norms about the role of the press in politics and society, (ii) norms about business of the news organization and (iii) journalistic professional norms, e. g. about objectivity, balance etc. (Bennett, 1996: 375). The media logic is significantly adapted by political actors who seek to reproduce it in order to gain increased publicity, hence contributing to the dominant position of the media in society (Altheide and Snow, 1979).

The frequency of media appearances of political actors can be defined as standing (Feindt and Kleinschmit, 2011). The chance to appear as an actor speaking in the media depends on different factors. One of major importance is the actors' status and resources (Gerhards et al., 1998: 43), whereby the latter includes the budget for public relations, technical equipment and professional media liaison people (fundamental elements of success with approaches to the media). Therefore,

standing indicates capacities of actors to communicate issues in such a way that they gain media coverage.

2.2. Forest policy analysis: the interest-driven approach

Krott in his analytical approach links forest policy research with research on public opinion and media communication. Already his paper on the Waldsterben (forest dieback) debate in Austrian media showed an actor and interest-driven way of analyzing media reporting (1987). Krott assumes that public arenas with a widely accepted opinion determine political conflicts. He argues that actors "(...) will always try to promote that public opinion, which serves their self-interests (...)" (Krott, 2005; 168). More specifically, he highlights the role of the media when he describes their selection process in the following way: "The mass media select from the wealth of pro and contra arguments in conflicting issues and give more time and space to a position they prefer." Several studies supported his argument through analyzing media articles on forests (Krumland, 2004; Park, 2009; Sadath et al., 2013b). Ferree et al. (2002) refer to the actors instead of the arguments when arguing that journalists may highlight some speakers within the media while others are less visible. Krott (2005) also recognizes the limitations of media reporting in terms of representing a specific position beyond this selection. With the exception of commentaries, media is not expected to give obvious value judgements (Nusser, 1994; Krott, 1987). Resulting from this formal representation of media as an objective communication platform, actors speaking in the media can gain even more political impact. Particularly "small groups" that do not represent larger stakeholder groups can gain from this situation as media purports to provide balanced representations (Nusser, 1994; Krott, 2005). The problem for empirical studies building on interest-driven approaches is that actors seldom openly postulate all their interests. Here it should be differentiated between formal interests as presented and informal interests – which should be not confused with incorrect or illegal interests – that are often hidden and need to be analyzed in the different way. From our perspective, frame analysis might be a means of understanding the underlying (informal) interests.

2.3. Framing

Media does not only tell people what issue to think about but also how to think about that issue. The media includes the manner in which events and issues are organized and framed, especially by media professionals and their audiences (Reese et al., 2001). To frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). Framing highlights particular pieces of information about an item, thereby assigning more importance to that information which naturally has an impact on audiences' interpretation of news stories (Entman, 1993).

The framing concept has been understood as "scattered" and missing the opportunity for clear operationalization (Entman, 1993). The reason for this lack of clarity results as well from the different epistemological underpinnings of scholars developing the concept. Some scholars highlight the ideal character of frames, e.g. Schön and Rein (1994) who understand frames as policy positions "resting on an underlying structure of belief, perception and appreciation". Other scholars concentrate more on the process of how frames are built, highlighting that the framing processes is strategic and that actors use framing to pursue their interests (Benford and Snow, 2000). Despite these different perspectives, scholars tend to agree that interests and frames are interconnected. Schön and Rein (1994) argue that interests are shaped by frames and frames are used to promote interests. Consequently, they perceive policy controversies as disputes amongst actors who sponsor conflicting frames. In regards to frames used in the media, Feindt and Kleinschmit (2011) pointed out

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