

Media Narratives and Public Action: An Essay on Media Representation and Public Perception of Sustainability Issues

Tezor K. Dedam*

Department of Journalism and Communications, University of Lagos, University Road Lagos Mainland Akoka, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

In contemporary society, social gaps and sustainability issues have affected several facets of human and community development. These challenges are further enhanced by negligible public action and media coverage is essential to enhancing public action. In this paper, a systematic review of literature is conducted for evaluating the aspects of modern media narratives that may have contributed to existing public perceptions of sustainability. Additionally, conceptual frameworks are established concerning how media narratives can influence public perception and opinion for actionable intervention. The results show that collective perception is essential for public action, and can be achieved through directing media narratives at social confines that define the targeted public. The paper also proposed a 3-D model for public news reception that defines the possibility or prevalence of public action. The results imply that; (a) public perception can be shaped through a social or indirect approach and (b) Activism and social change can be pursued along the 3-D model for public news reception.

Keywords: Public opinion • Public action • Public perception • Media narratives • Sustainability • Social change

Introduction

In 1985, three scientists discovered an occurrence of depleting ozone in the atmosphere over the Antarctic region [1]. The study suggested a causative factor of Chloro Fluoro Carbons (CFCs) and further attributed the detriments of ozone depletion to human, animal, and environmental health. They termed this region of ozone loss the ozone hole. Further research reviewed it and adopted it into a diplomatic discourse on a global scale [2,3]. Progressively transparent information on the ozone hole was employed in mainstream media and generated worldwide concern. As a result of this growing concern, several government bodies signed the Montreal Protocol in 1987 to phase out the production of CFCs, Hydro Chloro Fluoro Carbons (HCFCs), and other substances classified as Ozone-Depleting Substances (ODS).

In recent years, the ozone hole has significantly healed, with projections for further improvement in the future [4]. We can attribute the success of the reversal efforts to policy and diplomatic decisions [5]. Under the directives of the Montreal Protocol, nations like the United States, Denmark, Canada, and Norway developed incentives to eliminate the use of CFCs in products [6]. In addition, the halocarbon industry has since adjusted its production mass and developed safer alternatives in the years that followed. Furthermore, concerned stakeholders have employed several other approaches on a diplomatic and industrial scale to curb the emission of CFCs and, by extension, reverse ozone depletion [7].

Despite highlighted incentives, evidence suggests a relative under-reporting of the public role in the ozone hole reversal. The public, in this case, encompasses consumers, collective groups of individuals, and other factions of the general public. Further studies show these public factions to have engaged

in action through the collective perception of the issue and these perceptions were formed by the narratives through which the media framed them [8,9].

Previous studies have discussed the relevance of public action through perception. However, the existing discourse on public perception of social issues appears to be characterized by gaps concerning media narratives. This paper aims to establish the media's influence on these perceptions beyond sheer coverage. Instead, the paper aims to explore the particular information frameworks and narrative styles most effective in public action and their channels of impact. We will pursue the aim by evaluating theories, conceptual frameworks, and the selected pathway of perception-opinion-action.

Description

The study will employ the primary case study of the ozone hole and a second case study of flood and wildfire risk ratings in the United States.

The leverage of collectivism

This paper has employed a conceptual framework for the relationship between the variables of media narratives and public action along the sequential pathway of perception, opinion, and action. The final phase of this pathway is action, which is the most critical phase. The importance of action stems from its direct impact on social change and its inclination toward collectivism.

However, we can explore the leverage of collectivism beyond action and towards the other phases of the pathway, perception, and opinion. This approach will explore the perspective of collectivism in forming perceptions and opinions. It will essentially ask whether the public forms opinions and perceptions individually or as a group and which option better drives public action. Media influence can take effect through individual (private) or group (public) impacts [10,11]. The group impacts are indirect and exist in social ramifications, thereby pointing to the possibility of perceiving news and forming an opinion based on the social constructs or contexts under which the audience exists. Collectivism, in this case, can affect how the public perceives information and acts upon it. Hence, news framed to collective interests - as opposed to personal effects - can address the collectivism evident in the news perception.

The basis for this perspective is that collective action is founded on collective interests or the interests of social constructs that guide the receiving public [12]. Regarding the case study, the wide-ranging scope of ozone

*Address for Correspondence: Tezor K. Dedam, Department of Journalism and Communications, University of Lagos, University Road Lagos Mainland Akoka, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria, E-mail: rowandedam@gmail.com

Copyright: © 2023 Dedam TK. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Received: 21 August, 2023, Manuscript No: jmcj-23-110788; Editor assigned: 23 August, 2023, PreQC No. P- 110788; Reviewed: 08 September, 2023, QC No. Q- 110788; Revised: 22 September 2023, Manuscript No. R- 110788; Published: 03 October, 2023, DOI: 10.37421/2165-7912.2023.13.541

depletion's consequences was instrumental in the public reaction to it. The news framing aligned with these consequences; the media's coverage of the issue was inclined towards its harm to humanity as opposed to a select few who indulged in ozone-harmful activities. The highlighted potential threats were a skin cancer pandemic, depleted agricultural resources, and detriment to marine life. In addition, the media harnessed the leverage of collectivism by attributing the cause of the ozone hole to public use, which further empowered the general public to act against it. Given the bulk of products with CFCs in public circulation, there was a direct line of action for the public. The presented information spurred this direct action by prominently highlighting the public's collective role in addition to the brevity of the issue.

The 3-D model for news reception

To achieve collective perception, opinions, and action on sustainability and social issues, a large fraction of the public would have to agree to several facets of the issue at hand. These facets can include brevity, the cause, and a pathway to impact change. Disagreement among these factions can undermine public action, stemming from various media outlets framing information differently to form various opinions in the general public. First, however, it is essential to understand the underlying factors in why some parts of the public may have negative perceptions of social issues and how they attribute this to media framing.

To understand said underlying factors, we will divide these perceptions across the tenets of disinterest, defiance, and defenselessness. These tenets are based on a collective review of documented mass reception and responses to news coverage across the literature.

Disinterest refers to a general sense of removal from the importance or urgency of the issues reported in news media. Studies have cited several determinant factors in the case of disinterest, one of which is a general sense of being unaffected by the problem at hand [13].

Another reason for disinterest in the news is the negative connotations that consumers often associate with it [14,15]. In a study by the Reuters Institute, the authors reported that 42% of Americans actively avoid news coverage because of the grind-down emotional effect that it subjects them to [16]. The report also highlights a decline in news consumption in recent years, in alignment with major global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war.

Villi M, et al. [15] further highlights the causative factor of extensive coverage of selected news topics and the sense of fatigue that it may induce in consumers [15]. Disinterest, in this case, would arise from the need to avoid recurring journalistic topics. We can liken this causative factor to a general sense of overload that media coverage can often induce in its consumers, as cited in Jain P and Malaiya S [17].

Regarding the case study of the ozone hole, we can test the case for disinterest across the ramifications of negative connotations and news overload. In the month of its emergence into the public sphere, the news of the ozone layer appeared to be relatively subdued compared to other major global events.

From a review of news archives from that period, the results show relatively minimal coverage of the ozone hole on the day of the revealing publication and the months that followed. From May to December, 1985, the major publications on the ozone hole depletion are shown in the table below: [18].

However, as time passed, the news of the ozone hole became incorporated into mainstream news dissipation [19,20]. Going by the framework for recurring coverage and over-representation, as shown in Villi M, et al. [15]. There might be a substantial argument to refute that the news of the ozone hole had an overbearing effect on the public because the media had spread it out over a long duration. Furthermore, it was associated with a significant sense of self-efficacy [19].

Defiance in news perception is based on the tendency for disbelief among consumers. In the earlier referenced Reuters Institute study, a reported average global drop in news consumer trust was the case. In several cases,

news reception reflects existing perceptions of the topic, usually created by media narratives from different sources. For example, Park CS and Kaye BK [21] stipulated that the reaction of disbelief towards news arises from framing done by previous related news and how this framing corresponds with already induced perceptions of the same topic [22]. Park CS and Kaye BK [21] cited a case study of news perception amongst college students on the nuclearization summit between the U.S. and North Korea in June 2018. The participants in the study primarily showed accordant reactions towards reports that framed North Korea in a negative light and expressed more doubt towards narratives that framed North Korea more positively. The study cites the typically negative coverage of North Korea and Kim Jong Un in American media and how it moderated participant defiance or acceptance. Similar studies on public defiance of news coverage have shown that the public can shape their reception by framing the news in their own opinions [23].

The third tenet of the 3-D model is defencelessness, which implies a sense of inability to act on the issues presented in the news. Tunney C, et al. [23] discussed the concept of self-efficacy concerning news reception [24]. In the study, the authors show that while distress from negative news can cause avoidance in some factions of consumers, news reports with a sense of efficacy tend to spur less avoidance. Consumers generally avoid negative news when there is a sense of defencelessness, as opposed to perceived efficacy [25]. Hence, a sense of self-efficacy appears to undermine helplessness in consumers and, by extension, the probability of avoiding negative news. Further analysis leans back to framing narratives; Overgaard CSB [25] proposes the concept of constructive journalism in framing negative news to enhance news credibility and self-efficacy in readers [19]. This perspective posits that framing news can directly affect news consumers' helplessness levels and efficacy.

Regarding the case study of the ozone hole, the available literature shows a large pool of self-efficacy. In addition, the news coverage showed a clear and concise depiction of the issue, its urgency, and well as an equally clear and concise approach toward ending it [19].

Driving factors for news reception and public action

Media pressure: We will show the role of media pressure in driving public action in many cases. In one example, Dorfman L and Krasnow ID [26] highlight the pathways through which the media is used to promote public health such as agenda setting, information dissemination, and information framing [27]. In other examples, media affects public action through a multifaceted approach. In some cases, the role of media in pressure for public action exists on its ability to reflect already existing notions and incentives in public, hence, serving as a form of propagation towards other factions of the public [28]. In alternate cases, the media projects on matters the public is uninformed mainly about. Regardless of the context, the concept of 'pressure' has shown a direct correlation with more disruptive and direct action from the public [29].

Mainstream media covered the ozone hole with an inclination towards a 'doom and gloom' tone [30]. This approach highlighted the immediate and highly detrimental effects of the ozone hole, i.e., the media emphasized the brevity of the consequences and how soon these consequences were approaching. This notion of pressure was instrumental to the action taken by the public, but several studies have condemned the said doom and gloom approach as being inefficient because it removes an avenue for discourse and solutions [31]. However, the media presented the information with actionable solutions that the same public to which they propagated the news could enact, undermining the negative connotations associated with doom and gloom messaging.

Compared with the more contemporary issue of climate change, media pressure is still the case [32]. However, the ramifications in which they exert this pressure differ from that of the ozone hole. While coverage of the ozone hole highlighted the direct consequences as they relate to the public, the effect of climate change is still mainly unrelatable to several parts of the public [33]. Results from public perception research show that a growing percentage of the public is becoming concerned with climate change. However, the effects of climate change often appear to be far out on a time and location scale, undermining the sense of urgency in the public perception [34]. Hence, media pressure must take these factors and apply contextual considerations.

Personalized information framing: The case for driving public action through media is also dependent on personalized approaches. Examples of personalized approaches are evident in the second case study of risk assessments for home buying in the U.S. There is a rapid emergence of development and housing sales expanding in flood and wildfire high-risk regions [35]. This growth exists despite risk ratings and the propensity to lose lives and property.

A review of this growing trend has pointed to the factor of information framing and how the current information framing in place may be sub-par for a public understanding of wildfire risks.

Using conceptual constructs from behavioral science, we can frame a relationship between risk information presentation and behavioral tendencies. Under their postulations of previous studies, human behavior can better consider risk assessment by providing timely feedback and reminders, reaching out during significant transitions and decisions, and using intuitive metrics to present information [36]. The tool of intuitive presentation of information leans towards information framing in a way that the consumer can relate - in a personalized approach. When environmental hazards, sustainability issues, or any other risks are personalized, they are more likely to spur public action. Studies have documented examples across fields of medicine, criminal justice, and journalism [37-39]. An example of this inclination is the case of homeowners being more likely to take action against risk when personal experience is a driving factor [40].

Essentially, personalized news and information systems approaches have incorporated measures beyond surface depictions. Gall M, et al. [40] highlight a series of these efforts in the form of tools and systems that highlight the monetary implications of environmental hazards and the closest possible depictions of the time charts in which these hazards will happen to them [41]. Personalized information is a sharp contrast from the typical bland representations of risk and hazards (for example, "Heat Risk: 84 (extreme).") We have exemplified these personalized approaches in the case of hazard risk ratings. However, they are also evident in the case of the ozone hole - through the reported implications of skin cancer and loss of agriculture that threatens the general public. Information framed for its direct implications on an individual would likely motivate the individual. This theory leans toward achieving public action through individual media influence and expanding to public domains.

Conclusion

Conclusively, two of the primary channels through which media narratives can drive public action are media pressure and personalized information framing. However, moderating factors exist within these concepts, and the 3-D model for news reception is an example. Therefore, driving public action through media narratives is achievable by addressing the tenets of news reception highlighted in the 3-D model.

The paper also makes a case for the importance of media-driven public action through a collective approach. The collective approach requires targeting the audience as a society by addressing social constructs which define these groups.

References

- Farman, Joseph C., Brian G. Gardiner and Jonathan D. Shanklin. "Large losses of total ozone in Antarctica reveal seasonal ClO x/NO x interaction." *Nature* 315 (1985): 207-210.
- Solomon, Susan. "The mystery of the Antarctic ozone "hole"." *Rev Geophys* 26 (1988): 131-148.
- Singh, Richard S. "The Antarctic ozone hole." *SciAm* 258 (1988): 30-37.
- Singh, A. K. and Asheesh Bhargawa. "Atmospheric burden of Ozone Depleting Substances (ODSs) and forecasting ozone layer recovery." *Atmos Pollut Res* 10 (2019): 802-807.
- Solomon, Susan, Joseph Alcamo and A. R. Ravishankara. "Unfinished business after five decades of ozone-layer science and policy." *Nat Commun* 11 (2020): 4272.
- Morrisette, Peter M. "The evolution of policy responses to stratospheric ozone depletion." *Nat Resour J* (1989): 793-820.
- Abbasi, S. A., Tasneem Abbasi, S. A. Abbasi and Tasneem Abbasi. "The global ozone-depletion trends." *Ozone Hole: Past, Present, Future* (2017): 101-111.
- Ungar, Sheldon. "Bringing the issue back in: Comparing the marketability of the ozone hole and global warming." *Soc Probl* 45 (1998): 510-527.
- Benedick, Richard Elliot. "Lessons from the ozone hole." *EPA J* 16 (1990): 41.
- , Eric. "How does media influence social norms? Experimental evidence on the role of common knowledge." *PSRM* 7 (2019): 561-578.
- Li, Miao. "Pluralistic ignorance in Sino-Hong Kong conflicts: The perception of mainland Chinese people living in Hong Kong." *Chin J Commun* 9 (2016): 153-172.
- Hardin, Russell. "Collective Action Washington." DC: Resources for the Future (1982).
- Edgerly, Stephanie. "The head and heart of news avoidance: How attitudes about the news media relate to levels of news consumption." *Journal* 23 (2022): 1828-1845.
- Tunney, Carin, Esther Thorson and Weiyue Chen. "Following and avoiding fear-inducing news topics: Fear intensity, perceived news topic importance, self-efficacy and news overload." *Journal Stud* 22 (2021): 614-632.
- Villi, Mikko, Tali Aharoni, Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Pablo J. Boczkowski, et al. "Taking a break from news: A five-nation study of news avoidance in the digital era." *Digit Journal* 10 (2022): 148-164.
- Newman, Nic. "Overview and key findings of the 2022 Digital News Report." *RISJ* (2022).
- Jain, Paras and Soman Malaiya. "Growing Disinterest of People towards New Channels." *Methodolog* 6 (2018).
- Google News Archives. "Ozone Hole." (2022).
- Ungar, Sheldon. "Knowledge, ignorance and the popular culture: climate change vs. the ozone hole." *PUS* 9 (2000): 297.
- Bartholic, Jon F. "Environmental era issues." *JCWRE* 82.
- Park, Chang Sup and Barbara K. Kaye. "Doubt vs. Trust: Framing effects of the news about the 2018 Trump-Kim Jong Un Summit in Singapore on American college students." *Int J Commun* 14 (2020): 19.
- Feick, Lukas, Karsten Donnay and Katherine T. McCabe. "The subconscious effect of subtle media bias on perceptions of terrorism." *Am Politics Res* 49 (2021): 313-318.
- Tunney, Carin, Esther Thorson and Weiyue Chen. "Following and avoiding fear-inducing news topics: Fear intensity, perceived news topic importance, self-efficacy and news overload." *Journal Stud* 22 (2021): 614-632.
- Park, Chang Sup and Barbara K. Kaye. "What's this? Incidental exposure to news on social media, news-finds-me perception, news efficacy and news consumption." *In Social Media News and Its Impact* (2021) 98-121.
- Overgaard, Christian Staal Bruun. "Mitigating the consequences of negative news: How constructive journalism enhances self-efficacy and news credibility." *Journal* 24 (2023): 1424-1441.
- Dorfman, Lori and Ingrid Daffner Krasnow. "Public health and media advocacy." *Annu Rev Public Health* 35 (2014): 293-306.
- Cacciatore, Michael A., Dietram A. Scheufele and Shanto Iyengar. "The end of framing as we know it... and the future of media effects." *Mass Commun Soc* 19 (2016): 7-23.
- Gavin, Neil T. "Pressure group direct action on climate change: The role of the media and the web in Britain—A case study." *BJPIR* 12 (2010): 459-475.
- Chapman, Clark R and David Morrison. "Cosmic catastrophes." Springer 2013.
- Kelsey, Elin. "Propagating collective hope in the midst of environmental doom and gloom." *CJEE* 21 (2016): 23-40.
- Schäfer, M. S and Painter, J. "Climate journalism in a changing media ecosystem: Assessing the production of climate change-related news around the world." *Wiley Interdiscip Rev Clim Change* 12 (2021): e675.

32. Whitmarsh, Lorraine and Stuart Capstick. "Perceptions of climate change." In *Psychology and climate change* (2018): 13-33.
33. Fagan, Moira and Christine Huang. "A look at how people around the world view climate change." (2019).
34. Radeloff, Volker C., David P. Helmers, H. Anu Kramer and Miranda H. Mockrin, et al. "Rapid growth of the US wildland-urban interface raises wildfire risk." *PNAS* 115 (2018): 3314-3319.
35. Yoeli, Erez, David V. Budescu, Amanda R. Carrico and Magali A. Delmas, et al. "Behavioral science tools to strengthen energy & environmental policy." *Behav Sci Policy* 3 (2017): 68-79.
36. Blaha, Michael J and Roger S. Blumenthal. "New risk-assessment guidelines—more or less personalized?." *Nat Rev Cardiol* 11 (2014): 136-137.
37. Goel, Sharad, Justin M. Rao and Ravi Shroff. "Personalized risk assessments in the criminal justice system." *Am Econ Rev* 106 (2016): 119-123.
38. Brooks, Jennifer D., Hermann Nabi, Irene L. Andrulis and Antonis C. Antoniou, et al. "Personalized risk assessment for prevention and early detection of breast cancer: integration and implementation (Perspective 18)." *J Pers Med* 11 (2021): 511.
39. Stock, Alexia, Rachel A. Davidson, Joseph E. Trainor and Rachel Slotter, et al. "What makes homeowners consider protective actions to reduce disaster risk? An application of the precaution adoption process model and life course theory." *IJDRS* 12 (2021): 312-325.
40. Gall, Melanie, Emrich Christopher and Aquilino Marie. "To understand flood and wildfire risks, homeowners need to understand their future costs" *Fast Company* (2022).
41. Arias, Eric. "How does media influence social norms? Experimental evidence on the role of common knowledge." *PSRM* 7 (2019): 561-578.

How to cite this article: Dedam, Tezor K. "Media Narratives and Public Action: An Essay on Media Representation and Public Perception of Sustainability Issues." *J Mass Communicat Journalism* 13 (2023): 541.