Environmental Journalism: A Content Analytical Study of Omani Newspaper Coverage of Environmental Issues

Hind Hilmi Abbas, Ph.D
Department of Communication Studies
College of Applied Sciences,
Nizwa, Oman
Email: hind_abbas55@yahoo.co.uk

Emenyeonu, C. Ogadimma *
Department of Communication Studies
College of Applied Sciences,
Nizwa, Oman
Email: c.ogadi@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author

Abstract
This study addresses the question of environmental journalism in Oman with particular reference to press coverage of environmental issues. Using content analysis as the research method, the study seeks to know if environmental issues were given due prominence or under-reported in Omani newspapers by looking at such parameters as quantum of coverage, news genres, prominence, language, tone, story placement, etc. The study finds that environmental reporting is yet to find a strong footing in Omani press given that most of the reports are straight news without any form of interviews or in-depth analysis that could put environmental issues in the right perspective. Also the study reveals that the Omani newspapers subscribe largely to wire services (agencies) for news, thus promoting global news agenda rather than local news that are beneficial to the immediate readers of the newspapers. To reverse these trends, the study recommends, amongst others, that there should be adequate training and education for Omani journalists in regard to environmental and science reporting so that they could engage in investigative or probing environmental reportage rather than just straight news reporting of environmental events.

Key words: Environmental journalism, environment, environmental issues, Omani press, coverage of environment.
Introduction
The environment has become a global phenomenon ever since the United Nations organized ‘Man and the Biosphere’ conference in Stockholm in 1972 to address the raging environmental woes that threatened and still threatens the planet earth. This conference was novel as it made the environment, for the first time, an issue of immense debate. (Earth Summit History, n.d). Ever since then there have been a lot of efforts at the global level to ensure that the planet earth is sustained. From Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Kyoto, Bali, Copenhagen to Doha, global efforts have been unabated in the fight to secure the environment.

Apart from global efforts, regional and national governments have also lent their weights in fighting environmental decay. Oman has played a very active role in environmental protection as evidenced in its participation in the ratification of many earth or environmental protocols. But it’s worrying that environmental issues are not adequately reported like political, entertainment, economic and other issues in the Omani press. It, perhaps, seems like environmental issues are not prioritized in many an Omani media. This is not peculiar to Omani media, but general to the Arab media. Najib (2008) and Arab Forum for Environment (2008) assert that Arab environmental information problem cannot be divorced from the larger problem concerning Arab science journalism, which is still marginal in Arab media.. Najib further contends that despite the fact that environmental issues discussions have increased dramatically in the Arab media in the last decade, these discussions were merely limited to news and instant reactions to environmental disasters. This study intends to find out to what extent newspapers in Oman report the environment by looking at frequency of coverage, sourcing of environmental news, news prioritization in terms of placement and prominence. It will also look at environmental news genre to find out which ones are prioritized and why?

Literature Review
There is little or no studies done regarding media coverage of environment in Oman. Therefore review of literature will be based on international studies and the few studies done by Omani researchers. Given that the media plays the important role of helping the public to understand environmental issues, communication researchers, have continued to study how the media do this (Dudo, 2005). Results from such studies have shown to some extent a mixed reaction. Some studies have found that the media’s representation of environmental issues is positive. For example, Morgan and Stenbjerre, (1997) cite Fortner and Mayer (1991) as saying that media coverage most probably have led to better understanding of environmental issues. Priest (2001) and Smith (2002) (as cited in Dudo, 2005) contend that the media contribute significantly in educating the public on environmental issues. It can be argued therefore that the publics’ attitude to the environment is shaped by the attention (amount of coverage) the media focus on environmental issues. This study will therefore measure the intent and purpose of environmental news coverage in Omani newspapers to determine where they place emphasis on advocacy, information, education, mobilization etc.

At the other end of the spectrum some researchers like Liebler and Bendix (1996) are of the opinion that environmental news has been “crises or event oriented” (p.53). The media can be said to be reactive rather than proactive. Other studies have characterized media portrayal of the environment as weakened by distortions, inconsistencies, manipulations, and misrepresentation of data (Nitz and West, 2004, p. 207). There are further claims that environmental issues coverage all over the world has dropped despite the extreme strange weather that is being experienced recently. Fischer, (2013) writes that coverage of climate change by the world’s journalists dropped by two percent in 2012. This is supported by Fahey, (2013) who says that despite the fact that climate impacts were felt more intensely and more frequently in 2011, there
was declining media coverage of global warming in 2012 in favor of politics. However, Fahey presents the brighter side of environmental coverage by citing a study done by Bill Kovarik of Radford University, Virginia that the four largest U.S daily newspapers – New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal and USA Today – increased their coverage of the environment by 10 percent in 2012, more than the tally in 2011, but 11 percent below 2010.

Adel (2013) cites a study conducted by Project for Improved Environmental Coverage which indicated that the media is not paying serious attention to environmental issues with the seriousness they deserve. Statistics from the study showed that out of the 30 national news organizations surveyed in the United States, environmental coverage represented only 1.2 percent headlines, while entertainment and crime coverage dominated media space. Najib (2008), in agreement to the above writes that less than 10 percent of Arab media has a full editor on environmental issues. Even those that assign a regular page for the environment withdraw same at the pressure of political, economic and other news reports. Thus environmental stories could be said to be used as fillers. It could be said also that environmental issues are not high enough on media agenda to stimulate the sort of public concern that prompts concerted political action. The media may well continue to focus its attention on health, the economy or crime, thereby drawing public attention from the issues relating to the environment.

Fahn, (2008), argues that climate change issues coverage by the media is very important as it helps in tackling the challenges of global warming. Elsewhere the Project for Improved Environmental Coverage (2013) believes that most news outlets prioritize entertainment and crime news. According to this study, entertainment headlines appeared three times more than environmental headlines, while crime headlines, albeit considered a local issue, appeared at the ratio of 69 – 1 in the national morning network news.

Miller, (2012) writes that given their reach, the main stream news outlets have a moral responsibility to do a better job covering public interest news like the environment. Unfortunately this is a far cry from what is required hence he (Miller) hopes to see environmental headlines three times more than entertainment ones. Given this prognosis of environmental coverage, this study will endeavor to find out if there is paucity in environmental coverage and come up with reasons why the paucity of coverage of environmental issues obtains.

Al Foor, (2013) investigated the role journalists play in two most read Omani newspapers – Oman and Alwatan in contributing to solving environmental problems through environmental coverage. The study reveals that by placing environmental issues prominently the newspapers would both attract the attention of the citizens and those of the policy makers. A better understanding of environmental coverage in Omani Media, as the study contends, is vital for policy making and solving environmental problems. This study will attempt looking at the level of prominence environmental news attracts in terms of story placement, story hole, news type etc. in the Omani press.

**Statement of the Problem**

The press is seen as the major source through which the public receives environmental issues information. Thus, the responsibility of educating, informing, and mobilizing the public on environmental issues rests squarely with the media. And how well the press carries out this task determines the attitude of the public and policy makers toward the environment. As Goodfield (1981) argues “The public are those whose science teachers are the media” (p.8). Thus, whatever the media consider important is always considered important by the public. How much attention the Omani media has paid to environmental issues to drive environmental protection is the focal point of this study. As Rademakers (2004) rightly observed, “Communication of information to the public about environmental issues is critical to the publics’ perception of the environment and what public policies will result” (p.8)
Given that the public learn and are informed by the media on environmental issues, then the quality and quantum of environmental coverage becomes critical and crucial. This study investigates the level of prominence given to environmental issues by the Omani media given that good environmental coverage is central to sustaining the environment. Put differently this study will examine how well the environment is covered in the Omani press by looking at the following parameters – quantum of coverage, framing, story placement, prominence, sourcing etc.

Research Questions
Following the statement of the research problem, this study will strive to answer the following questions.

1. What is the frequency or quantum of environmental coverage?
2. What is the quality of environmental issues coverage?
3. What aspect(s) of the environment does the press prioritize and why?
4. How is environmental news sourced and what are the implications?
5. How much prominence does environmental news enjoy in the Omani press?
6. What is the purpose of environmental news coverage?

Research Objectives
The objectives of this study, which take bearing from the research questions, are as follows.

1. To determine how much there is of environmental news in the Omani press.
2. To ascertain the value accorded to such environmental news coverage
3. To determine what aspect(s) of environmental news is prioritized.
4. To find out how environmental news is sourced so to give a clue as to why local or international environmental issues are featured more.
5. To find out if environmental news is at par with other news items like politics, entertainment etc.
6. To determine the purpose of environmental news.

Significance of Study
This study assumes significance given that it will contribute to the meager literature on environmental journalism in Oman and in the Arab world. It will also lead to improved environmental coverage in Oman.

Scope and Limitations
The study covers one year from June 2014 to June 2015 where composite week is used to select 60 issues for analysis. The limitation of the study resides in the lack of studies related to environmental coverage in Oman. The scarcity of such studies puts special importance on this study.

Methodology: Content Analysis
Berelson (1952) believes that content analysis is a quantitative, systematic and objective in the description of manifest content of Communication. In the same manner, Krelinger (1986) sees content analysis as “a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purposes of measuring variables, (p.157). These definitions limit content analysis only to numerical values, hence other researchers like Stempel (1981), Holstli (1969) argued that content analysis that focused only at numerical values are weak and therefore argued for the inclusion of qualitative content analysis to measure the values accorded to contents being analyzed. Therefore quantitative and qualitative content analysis will be used to record both the manifest content and values embedded in environmental issues coverage.
Kerlinger (1986) sees content analysis as “a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purposes of measuring variables, (p.157). Content analysis is employed to generate data that will answer the research questions in relation to quantum, value, sourcing, and prominence accorded environmental issues in Omani newspapers. The use of content analysis as the methodology in this study hinges on the fact that it allows quantitative and qualitative measurement of different media contents by systematically identifying and recording their properties from such criteria like length of articles, number of photos, and frequency of words or sources. (BBC World Service trust, 2008).

Selection and Justification of Newspaper
Purposive sampling is used in selecting newspaper whose environmental issues coverage will be analyzed. Purposive method has to do with the selection of key media and not the less important media whose articles will be analyzed (Mcanamara, 2006). Consequently, Oman Observer – the most prominent English newspaper in Oman was selected for this study. Oman Observer is a major daily in English. It is mostly read hence the claim of a wide circulation. There are about five major newspapers in Oman including those in Arabic. The choice of one newspaper is representative enough. The choice of an English language newspaper resides in the large number of Omanis and Expatriates in Oman who communicate in English and are regular readers of the English Newspapers. However, there may be need to compare an English daily and Arabic daily to determine if language plays a role in the coverage of environmental issues in Omani newspapers.

The units of analysis for analyzing the newspapers contents include: content frequency, tone, purpose, news genres, sources, prominence, means of prominence, and language. These categories of analysis were adopted to give the researchers a lee way to answer properly the research questions and meet the research objectives.

Reliability
Reliability of this study was assured by using Holsti’s 1969 inter-coder reliability test to ensure that contents are properly coded. Reliability means that repetition of the same measurement must yield the same result. A sample of the population was examined by different coders and the same results merged out.

Validity
The forms were tested through a pilot study in which two weeks were selected and analyzed. Some adjustments were introduced to the categorization and sub-categorization of analysis and the forms were modified accordingly. The forms were arbitrated by two professors and their comments were incorporated in the forms.

Sampling and Data collection Procedure
Sixty issues of Oman Daily Observer were selected for analysis based on the composite week procedure. Weekends were not included in the issues selected given that most of the formal or official activities do not take place during the weekend in Oman.

Two forms were designed for coding data emanating from the issues that were analyzed. Form 1 was designed to record ‘what’ has been said where the content, tone, and purpose were analyzed. In terms of content, distinction was made between general environment coverage and environmental protection.
specifically. For tone the distinction is as follows, pro-environment, pro-environmental protection, anti-environment, anti-environmental protection, and neutral. Regarding coverage purpose, five categories were emphasized – namely; information, culture, mobilization, persuasive and other – which include anything that was not analyzed in any of the above categories. Form 2 was designed to answer the question on ‘how’ environmental issues were said or written. The form specifies six news genres along with the seventh Category to accommodate any other type. Sources were measured to estimate the originality of the story. In this study three categories were designed to measure sources. They include – by line, wire services, and ‘other’ for sources not included in the above. Prominence was measured in this study by looking at the location or placement of items in the newspaper. Theoretically, top news is front page news. Consequently, front, inside and back page news placements were analyzed to determine prominence. Also the quadrants in which the items were placed in the pages were further analyzed to lay claim to prominence. Thus, top right/left and bottom right/left page placement of items were analyzed. Further prominence is analyzed by looking at headlines, pictures, drawings/graphics, cartoons and ‘other’ for any category not included in those mentioned above. Finally, space or news hole was analyzed as it determines the quantum and importance of the story. The bigger the news hole, the more important it is believed to be. Language aspect was analyzed in terms of how formal or informal the language is. Formal language denotes the use of scientific language and jargons, while informal refers to language that targets all members of the society which is usually simple enough to aid comprehension. The study sought to find out if complex or complicated environmental issues were simplified for ease of comprehension.

**Data presentation and analysis**

Data presentation and analysis is based on the categories of “What has been said”, and ‘How it was said”. Content, tone, and purpose are examined in the “what has been said” category of analysis.

**Content:**

![Content Chart]

- No News Coverage
- Pollution
- Solid Waste
- Energy
- Pollution and Environmental Health
- Dissertifcation
- Marine Life
- Wild Life
- Water Conservation
- Industrial Disasters
- Environmental Health
- Environmental Education
- Protection
The content frequency was analyzed to detect how issues like pollution, solid waste, energy, pollution with regard to environment, desertification, marine life, wild life, water conservation, industrial disasters, environmental education and protection featured in the newspaper. The chart on content reveals that water conservation was mostly covered (13.33 percent) compared to other environmental issues. This may be because of the fact that Oman is a country in the arid region hence the call to conserve water. Also the fact that Oman is surrounded by three main seas – The Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Red Sea - calls for special attention for water resources. Environmental education ranked second at 10.00 percent, this reflected different educational activities like seminars on preserving environment, while calls for environmental protection was ranked third. Desertification, pollution, marine life, solid waste management, and energy were fourth on the priority list. At the bottom of the list is pollution and environmental health at 1.67 percent. This is understandable given that Oman is not highly industrialized and also practices international standard in the few industrialized zones.

**Tone:**

From the chart it is understood that the tone of environmental news coverage within the study period for the two distinct categories – environment, and environmental protection was positive at 45.00 percent. This was expected given that governments, institutions, bodies, campaigners, individuals are all pro-environment. However, there were more positive news on environment (8.33 percent), while environmental protection had 6.67 percent positive coverage which can be attributed to the fact that most of the reports detected were based on participation of the Sultanate in activities in local, regional or national environmental conferences, seminars, and workshops.
Purpose:

On the purpose of environmental news coverage, an interesting finding was that out of the sixty issues studied, 35 percent of the issues recorded no coverage of environmental issues. The chart shows that information ranked first (21.67 percent) because most of the coverage is straight news. This was expected given that it has often been said that the press has a heavy responsibility concerning the environment, as they are the primary source of environmental information for most people (Keating, 1993, in Rademakers, 2004). Mobilization ranked second on the single category at 6.67 percent. Mobilization coverages peaked at such times as bad weather when people were asked to take precautionary measures. Persuasion was least on the scale at 1.67 percent. This was not perplexing given that most of the citizens and residents are good ‘environmental citizens’.

How it was said category:

News genre:
It is interesting to note that reports and straight news coverage are the major means of reporting environmental news in Omani press. Thirty five percent of the issues had no coverage for the environment and out of the remaining 65 percent, report coverage stood at 30.00 percent, and straight news at 26.67 percent. There were no coverages based on interview and investigation which are the core of environmental reportage. There were no environment columnists. This further testifies to the paucity of environmental coverage in the Omani media, thus supporting Najib (2008) who asserts that “The problem of Arab environmental information may be related to a larger problem concerning Arab Science Journalism, which is still marginal in Arab Media”. The fact that there are no interviews and or investigative reporting where environmental issues could be put into right perspective by experts, or explained in details undermine good environmental reportage.

Source:

Given that most of the news genre on environmental coverage hinge on reports and straight news, it follows logically that the source of environmental issues coverage would be by lines. Newspaper reporters simply cover the events and report them as news. There are no interviews and no investigations. This may be because of abject lack of skills and training to conduct such interviews and investigations and how to highlight certain malpractices against the environment. This could be the reason why the Omani press depend mostly on wire services or agencies as sources of environmental news. (25.00 percent). This dependency erodes the responsibility of catering to the local audience as issues that may not have any relevance to the local public are addressed. For example while climate change may be important and on the global news agenda, rising soil salinity which is an acute local problem should be prioritized instead of climate change.
Prominence:

Environmental issues coverage enjoyed prominence in Omani press as 45.00 percent of the issues covered were placed at top quadrant of the newspapers, 13.33 percent were placed in the middle while 5.00 percent were placed at the bottom. It follows that major news coverage on first page usually continues on inside pages but the mere fact that the news were highlighted on the first page makes it prominent.

Theoretically, the placement of news on the page itself has different significance. Top of the page or upper part is devoted to top news while middle comes next and lower left comes before lower right. Forty five percent of the coverage was on top of the page whether first page of inside pages while 13.33 percent in the middle of the page and only five percent on the bottom of the page which signifies the importance given to the coverage.
Headlines, pictures (both black and white, and color), drawings etc. were used as means of effects and prominence. It’s interesting to note that the pictures used in the stories are mostly those of the officials which are usually much bigger than the stories they were meant to support. There were hardly any pictures, drawings or graphs relating or representing the issue being reported.

**Language:**

The language category examines the variety of language used in the message whether standard (formal), informal or colloquial which is usually used in the campaigns such as slogans. Simple language category is used here to detect whether jargons or scientific description on environmental phenomenon is simplified for the public through examples or analysis. Formal language is used in 41.6 percent of the coverage of environmental issues where the issue is retained as it is, i.e. conferences, symposia and workshops themes. Simple language is used in the reports rather than the straight news. Colloquial language is absent in the
coverage of environmental issues which is a major setback of the coverage where campaigns for environmental issues and environmental protection is completely absent.

Space:
This category is an attempt to measure the space devoted to environmental coverage throughout one year compared to the total space of the newspaper 13x20 inches.

The total area for each item was calculated in inches (width x length), a total space of 3158.4 inches constitutes the space allotted to environment throughout the year. As the size of the page of Oman Observer is 13x20 inches = 260 inches. The total area is divided by the page size to detect the actual coverage in pages and compare that to the space and prominence given to politics, economics, sports and other categories. Thus, 3158.4/260 = 12.15 pages.
This result answers the research question on the quantum of environmental issues coverage. Throughout the one-year span which is the time frame of the study, the coverage equals only 12.15 pages i.e. not up to one issue’s total space. This reflects the scarcity of environmental issues reporting compared to politics, economics, and sports to which certain pages are devoted on daily basis.

Findings
Based on the above data and analyses, this study came up with the following findings:

- Environmental issues coverage is momentum and coincides with, and focuses on official proceedings of conferences, symposia, seminars and workshops.
- The quality of environmental coverage reflects that environment is not a priority in Omani English press since it is seasonal and shallow.
- Climate change, water resources conservation top the coverage in Omani newspapers.
- The study reveals that the Omani media depend to a large extent on news from agencies which address global environmental news agenda rather than local news agenda.
The means and effects of prominence for environmental issues are headlines large fonts in colors), pictures of officials, and opening ceremonies of the major environmental activities taking place in the Sultanate, Gulf and globally. The coverage lacks drawings, cartoons, graphs or any scientific approaches that help explain or put the environment in proper perspective.

The purpose of the coverage is mainly informational rather than mobilization, persuasion, cultural or educational.

Dissemination of environment protection culture was not addressed at all.

Information topped the purpose of the coverage since five conferences, three seminars, one symposium and other regular meetings were covered in the news as opposed to only one campaign.

**Recommendations**

Consequent upon the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

More in-depth analysis of environmental issues is required to put environmental debates in the right perspective, and raise the awareness of the public.

Proper environmental journalism education has to be addressed in journalism departments in various universities and colleges in the Sultanate to equip environmental journalists with the right skill, knowledge and ability to address environmental issues properly.

Special training or refresher courses on how to cover environmental issues is crucial for journalists and should be organized from time to time.

Handbooks on environmental reporting should be developed as a vital tool to help environmental journalists in doing their work.

Campaigns and awareness programs are to be set to raise the awareness of citizens on environmental protection issues.

Regular materials on how to take precautionary measures against, and combat the effects of, cyclones and tropical storms must be incorporated in newspapers since Oman is surrounded by The Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Red sea, and Persian Gulf.

**Conclusion**

The media plays a huge role in the sustenance of the environment through its coverage of the environment. It is strongly believed that the media are the major source through which the public receives information in relation to environmental issues. Therefore the roles of educating, informing, persuading, and mobilizing the public about environmental challenges rest upon the media. It becomes pertinent and paramount that the media, the Omani media take adequate measures in ensuring that environmental issues are given due prominence and put in the right perspectives for the public to understand. These measures may include, but not limited to providing good education and training for environmental journalists. Also, rather than depending on agency reports on environmental issues, the Omani press could develop rapport with such organizations as Environment Society of Oman, Arab Forum for Environment and Development, UNEP, etc. to get better and well informed information on the Omani environment. This will help the journalists to focus on such local environmental concerns like Summer winds that raise sandstorms, ‘Wadis’ that get filled with rain water and flood vast land areas, cyclones making land falls and possibly causing flooding, soil salinity that is on the increase, beach and port pollution following spillages, and limited natural fresh water resources. There is also a deep need for proper training of environmental journalists and providing them with necessary tools that will help them to report the environment properly. Most importantly, rather than being reactive to environmental issues, or environmental issues being events based, the Omani press
should be proactive and strive to report the environment on a regular basis. This could be done by having environmental issues journalists and editors rather than general reporters handling environmental beats; and allocating regular pages or columns to the environment

References: