

# **A Study on the Construction of Public Environmental Awareness by Mainstream Media's Environmental Agenda Setting from the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism**

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**Abstract:** Due to the increasingly serious global ecological problems, the mainstream media has deeply influenced our views and actions by raising environmental protection issues. From the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, this study systematically examines how the environmental agenda-setting of mainstream media shapes the entire process and internal mechanisms of public environmental awareness. This study examines the characteristics of mainstream media in selecting environmental topics, constructing story frames, and using various symbols. Next, this paper focuses on how the public negotiates with the media through "coding-decoding" in the process of symbol interaction, and establishes a hierarchical cognitive structure step by step—from feeling that environmental issues are important to gradually shaping environmental values and behavioral intentions. The study also points out that due to the diverse interpretations of social groups and the moderating effect of media literacy, public environmental awareness shows a differentiated trend. In response to the structural contradictions and ethical dilemmas in current environmental communication—such as the contest between globalization and localization discourses and the erosion of publicity by commercial logic—this paper finally proposes optimization paths such as enhancing participatory interaction and building diversified collaborative communication networks, so as to promote a positive and healthy role of media environmental communication in constructing public awareness.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Research Background**

Environmental governance has become a key issue in human social development, caused by the continuous worsening of the global environmental crisis. As the core shaper of public discourse, mainstream media, through environmental agenda setting, deeply influence the public's cognitive framework of ecological issues. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the media use multiple symbols such as texts, images, and videos to construct a "pseudo-environment." Abstract environmental problems are transformed into concrete public issues, thereby affecting the public's perception of the importance of environmental protection and their value judgments. Western media often use negative labels to describe our environmental protection projects as "heterogeneous" images, which makes the audience have greater differences in understanding the level of environmental governance in China. Our domestic media, on the other hand, strive to balance the two narratives of economic development and ecological protection in the interweaving of globalization and localization discourse. In the field of environmental communication, there are some structural contradictions. Media convergence makes the agenda more resonant, but it also fragments information and prevents our ideas from connecting. In addition, the penetration of business logic weakens the publicity of environmental issues, and environmental discourse is often turned into a marketing symbol. In this context, the way the mainstream media uses the symbolic interaction mechanism to shape environmental awareness is an extension of the theory of environmental communication and a response to the complexity of ecological governance.

## 1.2. Research Significance

This research has both theoretical significance and practical use. Theoretically speaking, it combines symbolic interactionism with agenda setting theory, which can help us to understand the "encoding-decoding" interaction mechanism in the communication of environmental issues, understand that the relationship between media symbols and public cognition is not simple, and make up for the neglect of the micro-level cognitive construction process in traditional environmental communication research. Coupled with the framework of "social worlds/arenas analysis" in STS field, it provides an interdisciplinary new perspective for knowledge production and public participation in environmental governance. At the practical level, this study helps to reflect on the ethical dilemmas of mainstream media's environmental communication, examine the alienation of environmental discourse by instrumental rationality, and the loss of local environmental narrative discourse power under globalization. By revealing the resistant and negotiated characteristics of public decoding, it can provide references for optimizing media strategies. Through enhancing participatory interaction to bridge cognitive gaps and building a collaborative network of diverse actors to resist the erosion of commercial logic, the study promotes the transformation of environmental communication from one-way indoctrination to two-way negotiation, contributing to the formation of consensus and social mobilization for ecological civilization construction.

## 2. Relevant Concepts and Theoretical Basis

### 2.1. Definition of Relevant Concepts

#### 2.1.1. Mainstream Media

Mainstream media refer to media institutions that possess wide influence, authority, and credibility in society <sup>[1]</sup>. They usually cover large audiences and reflect dominant social values and public opinion trends. Mainstream media take various forms, including traditional media such as newspapers, television stations, and news agencies, as well as new types of media such as large news websites and social media platforms. Relying on professional editorial teams, sufficient resources, and rigorous review processes, the media identify, summarize, and release various types of information. In communicating environmental issues, the mainstream media plays a central role, shaping what we all pay attention to and influencing the direction of discussion. They are an important bridge connecting the government, companies, and the public.

#### 2.1.2. Environmental Issues

Environmental problems include a range of issues and debates related to the natural environment and ecosystems <sup>[2]</sup>. These problems include climate change, air pollution, water pollution, biodiversity loss, insufficient resources, and so on. These problems are characterized by their worldwide influence, complexity, and need to be solved immediately. They not only affect our present life and health, but also directly affect the survival and development of children in the future. The emergence of environmental problems is closely related to our human production and life activities. With the continuous development of society and the economy, environmental problems have become increasingly serious. The attention and coverage of the mainstream media on environmental issues can effectively help everyone better understand them and encourage us to protect the environment together.

#### 2.1.3. Agenda Setting

Agenda setting refers to the process that the media influences people to judge what is more important by selecting, reporting and highlighting certain topics <sup>[3]</sup>. Instead of passively showing the reality, the media will deliberately select information and put some things in a conspicuous position, which will guide us to pay attention to them. In the communication of environmental issues, mainstream media, through the function of agenda setting, bring some representative and urgent environmental problems to the public, making them aware of the seriousness of these issues. Agenda setting affects the level of public attention to environmental problems and shapes public views and

behaviors toward environmental protection.

#### **2.1.4. Public Environmental Awareness**

Public environmental awareness refers to the general public's level of knowledge, understanding, and mastery of environmental issues <sup>[4]</sup>. It specifically includes the public's cognition of the current state, causes, consequences, and countermeasures of environmental problems. The shaping of public environmental awareness is influenced by multiple factors, among which mass media play a key role. Through information dissemination by mass media, the public can obtain relevant information about environmental issues and build an initial understanding of environmental problems. As we know more about environmental protection, our understanding of it is constantly strengthening, which in turn affects our attitude and actions towards the environment. Raising everyone's awareness of environmental protection can help the society reach an agreement on environmental protection issues and promote the development of environmental protection.

### **2.2. Theoretical Basis**

#### **2.2.1. Symbolic Interaction Theory**

According to symbolic interaction theory, people communicate through symbols and their meanings <sup>[5]</sup>. These symbols serve as tools for conveying meaning through what we say, write, and look at. When we interact with one another, we clarify these symbols and incorporate our own interpretations to better understand what others are doing and thinking. The mainstream media uses various symbols, such as text, pictures, and videos, to report on environmental problems and convey this information to the public. We understand these symbols through our experiences and ideas, and we add special meanings to them. This process of symbolic interaction affects the public's understanding of environmental issues and also influences the interaction and communication between the public and the media.

#### **2.2.2. Agenda Setting Theory**

Agenda-setting theory focuses on the role of media in shaping our cognition. This theory says that although the media can't directly control what we think, they can guide us to think <sup>[6]</sup>. By selecting and highlighting certain things, the media put these topics in a conspicuous position, making us feel that they are very important. In the process of spreading environmental issues, mainstream media use the function of agenda setting to decide which environmental issues should attract everyone's attention and to what extent they should be emphasized. Agenda-setting theory provides theoretical support for us to study how mainstream media guide people to pay attention to environmental issues, and helps to reveal the mechanism of media in forming public environmental awareness.

## **3. Analysis of the Characteristics of Mainstream Media's Environmental Agenda Setting**

### **3.1. The Logic of Selection and Reinforcement of Environmental Issues**

In the process of constructing the environmental agenda, the core features of mainstream media are reflected in the dual consideration of the "salience priority" principle and "social resonance alignment" in issue selection. The media select topics based on public relevance, timeliness, and policy connections. "Hard issues" with global consensus, such as climate summits and extreme weather events, are often given priority coverage. By using high-frequency and high-visibility communication methods, the media strengthen public attention. In the new media environment, the media also need to meet the public's emotional resonance needs, tending to select "soft issues" that are more controversial and relatable, such as waste sorting and wildlife protection. Through narrative approaches, they stimulate public enthusiasm for participation. The continuous coverage of the "Yangtze River Fishing Ban" policy by domestic media demonstrates the policy orientation of ecological protection and touches public emotions through stories about fishermen's transitions.

However, the influence of business logic and traffic competition has caused some media to go astray when choosing topics. Some media always chase after "environmental controversies" or

"disaster spectacles", for example, they overemphasize the panic symbol caused by nuclear waste water discharge, which makes people think differently. Under the background of media convergence, traditional media and social platforms have formed a "collaborative selection" mechanism. Mainstream media will actively adopt hot topics on the Internet (such as "carbon neutrality" short videos of popular science) and expand the scope of communication through cross-platform topic integration.

### 3.2. The Construction Strategies of Media Narrative Frameworks

Through different storytelling methods, the mainstream media makes environmental issues have various meanings. This is mainly reflected in three core methods. The first is the "responsibility attribution framework", which emphasizes the environmental responsibility of the government, companies or individuals, and makes these issues have a moral color. The "accountability-style reports" of CCTV's Focus Report expose environmental destruction events, reinforcing the social consensus that "polluters should take responsibility for remediation." The second is the "conflict-solution framework," where environmental problems are placed in the opposing context of economic development and ecological protection. For example, when reporting on "photovoltaic desert control" projects, the narrative logic emphasizes how "green technology solves resource bottlenecks," easing public concerns about the cost of environmental protection [7]. The third is the "emotion-driven framework," which uses visual symbols (such as images of shrinking polar bear habitats) and data visualization (dynamic charts of carbon emissions) to evoke a sense of crisis among the public and promote the transition from cognition to practice.

The conflict between global and local discourses has led to imbalance in framework selection. Western media often portray China as a "high-emission country" using a "climate dominance" framework, while domestic media use an "ecological civilization" framework as a counter-narrative. These confrontational narratives reduce the space for public discussion of environmental issues. In the digital media era, fragmented communication further undermines the development of coherent narratives. "15-second environmental declarations" on short video platforms increase the speed of dissemination, but they also make public understanding of complex environmental problems more superficial.

### 3.3. The Cognitive Guidance Function of Multimodal Symbols

Mainstream media build a "cognitive guidance system" for environmental issues through the coordinated use of multiple symbols. Specifically, through the agenda setting of textual symbols, they use terms such as "climate crisis" and "sharp decline in biodiversity" to enhance the academic credibility of the topics, and employ metaphors such as "the Earth is heating up" to simplify public understanding. Visual symbols are used to evoke emotions; for instance, the shocking aerial footage of melting glaciers in the documentary *Planet Earth* transforms ecological crises into visual impact, triggering emotional resonance and motivating public action.

Interactive symbols are used to enhance participation. Short video platforms employ interactive features such as comments and voting (for example, "Low-Carbon Lifestyle Relay") to transform the construction of environmental awareness from one-way indoctrination into participatory practice, strengthening the "cognition-behavior" linkage mechanism among the public. However, the cognition of multimodal symbols may also bring bad effects. Commercial capital will use symbols such as "green promotion" to grasp the topic of environmental protection, such as finding celebrities to endorse advertisements for environmental protection products, which makes it difficult for everyone to distinguish between "ecological protection" and "consumerism". The algorithm mechanism may also create an "information cocoon room", which makes people's cognitive prejudice more serious.

## **4. The Construction Mechanism of Public Environmental Awareness from the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism**

### **4.1. The Interactive Cycle between Media Symbols and Public Cognition**

#### **4.1.1. Meaning Negotiation in the Encoding–Decoding Process**

From the perspective of symbolic interaction theory, public decoding and media symbolic coding together constitute a dynamic interactive process. When the media report environmental problems, they will use a specific symbol system (including language, images and sounds) to encode information and convey specific meaning and value orientation. In the process of receiving information, the public is not just a passive receiver; On the contrary, they will actively participate in the interpretation and negotiation of meaning. This decoding process is influenced by many factors, such as audience background, past experience, cultural environment and social atmosphere. Therefore, the same information may lead to different understandings and reactions of different recipients.

In this interactive stage, the communication between the media and the public is not a one-way transmission, but a two-way interaction. Next, the direction and content of media reports will be influenced by our feedback, discussion and reaction. When the public shows great concern about an environmental issue and has an in-depth discussion, the media usually strengthen reports to further consolidate their understanding. The negotiation of meaning in the process of encoding and decoding is not only a part of information transmission, but also a key mechanism for the formation of public environmental awareness <sup>[8]</sup>.

#### **4.1.2. Formation of a “Pseudo-Environment” in Environmental Cognition**

The symbolic communication of environmental issues by the media creates a "pseudo-environment", which refers to the virtual reality of environmental issues perceived by the public through media reports. This pseudo-environment will not completely reproduce the real situation of the environment, but the result of the media's intermediary reconstruction of public cognition by choosing and setting a narrative framework <sup>[9]</sup>. By emphasizing the seriousness, urgency and influence of some environmental problems, the media constructs a specific cognitive atmosphere and guides the public to understand and interpret environmental problems within this framework.

How was this "fake environment" created? It mainly depends on the media's choice of what to say, how to say it and what words to use. The media keep reporting those particularly bad weather and ecological disasters, so that all of us know more about climate change. Such reports will affect how much we care about environmental issues, and then change our attitude towards the environment and what we want to do. The views formed in this "environment" will often become the way we understand the real environmental problems, and to some extent, it will also shape our environmental awareness and our usual behavior habits.

## **4.2. The Hierarchical Construction of Environmental Cognition**

### **4.2.1. Primary Cognition: Perception of Environmental Problem Salience**

The establishment of environmental awareness can be divided into different stages, and basic cognition refers to everyone's feelings about the severity of environmental problems. At this stage, people mainly pay attention to the external manifestations and direct consequences of environmental problems, such as air pollution, water shortage and ecological degradation. Through vivid reports and intuitive picture presentation, the media effectively caught everyone's attention and made people aware of the existence of environmental problems and their impact on our daily lives.

When we first started to know something, people usually heard the news directly from the media, and often didn't think too deeply. By emphasizing how urgent and serious environmental problems are, the media has successfully attracted our attention. For example, when the media reports that a place is seriously polluted, they often use strong words and shocking pictures, which makes us particularly impressed by this problem. This initial understanding laid the foundation for us to form environmental awareness, and also prepared us for a deeper understanding of environmental issues.

#### **4.2.2. Deep Cognition: Shaping of Values and Behavioural Intentions**

From our most basic understanding, the deep construction of environmental awareness is actually inseparable from the formation of public values and behavior habits. When people pay more and more attention to environmental problems, they will begin to reflect on their own values and daily choices, and gradually form a set of systematic understanding about ecological protection.

By using a variety of reporting methods and narrative methods, the media inspires the public to explore the causes, consequences and solutions of environmental problems [10]. They often use expert dialogues and case studies to reveal the deeper social, economic and political roots behind environmental problems. Such analysis helps the public to realize the complexity of environmental problems and guide them to reflect and change their values. By showing successful examples of environmental protection practices and actions, the media encourages people to have a positive willingness to participate in environmental protection activities or support relevant policies.

When forming values and deciding what to do, people will be influenced by many different things, which will shape everyone's daily environmental protection behavior and ultimately help the whole society to become better aware of environmental protection.

### **4.3. Cognitive Differentiation and Diverse Interpretations among Social Groups**

#### **4.3.1. The Oppositional and Negotiated Positions of Public Decoding**

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, people's understanding of the environment is not the same, but there are many differences [11]. This difference mainly appears in the process of understanding environmental problems. When people understand media information, they often take a critical or negotiated position. The critical position is reflected in everyone's questioning and opposition to media reports. Among those environmental topics involving conflicts of interest or differences in values, some people have reservations about the media reports on climate change. They think that the media has exaggerated the seriousness of the problem, so they refuse to accept this information.

On the other hand, when the public understands the media information, they are willing to discuss and communicate with others, and work together to solve problems and reach an agreement, which is called negotiated stance. Everyone will use social platforms and community activities to share their thoughts and experiences, and jointly form their views on environmental issues. This consultative interpretation can promote the interaction between the public and create a space for discussing environmental issues.

#### **4.3.2. The Moderating Role of Media Literacy in Cognitive Construction**

Media literacy plays a very important regulatory role in the process of building public environmental awareness. Media literacy refers to our ability to understand, analyze and evaluate media information, which will directly affect everyone's performance in interpreting information. Groups with higher media literacy can better identify prejudice and false information in media content, so as to form a more rational and comprehensive environmental awareness.

In the dissemination of environmental problems, media literacy can help us to understand the media's storytelling methods and the use of symbols, and improve our ability to judge information [12]. Those with high media literacy can identify selective bias in environmental reports and develop a more comprehensive understanding. Moreover, media literacy enables everyone to rationally discuss and negotiate complex environmental issues, which can help society reach a consensus on environmental issues.

Therefore, improving the public's media literacy will help people better understand and participate in environmental issues and provide support for the diversification and development of environmental awareness.

## **5. Challenges and Optimization Paths of Environmental Communication in Mainstream Media**

### **5.1. Structural Contradictions in Current Practice**

#### **5.1.1. The Fight for Control of Discourse between Globalization and Localization**

In the tide of globalization, environmental problems have become transnational and global. International organizations and developed countries often have the final say on this topic. When reporting environmental events, the mainstream media should not only keep up with international trends, actively participate in the dialogue on global environmental governance, and pass on advanced environmental protection concepts and practices, but also take root locally. They need to pay attention to the unique environmental problems and development needs of their own countries. However, in practice, there is always some tension between the right to speak globally and the demand for localization. Some international environmental protection norms and concepts may not align with the actual situation in China. Under the influence of transnational public opinion, the mainstream media may overemphasize international standards, thereby marginalizing local environmental governance.

#### **5.1.2. Agenda Resonance and Fragmentation in the Context of Media Convergence**

Under the background of media convergence, information dissemination has become faster and wider. Mainstream media can use many different communication channels to create agenda resonance in the spread of environmental topics, so as to strengthen their influence. However, the problem of agenda fragmentation still exists. Different media platforms have different audiences, communication characteristics and goals. Therefore, the same environmental problem may be talked about differently on different platforms, and everyone may see and understand it differently. On social media, environmental problems are often spread in a piecemeal and emotional way, which makes it easy for everyone to stay on the surface and not go deep enough. Traditional media reports are more rigorous, but their spread speed and the people they can influence are limited. The contradiction between resonance and fragmentation on the agenda affects the overall effect of mainstream media in environmental communication.

### **5.2. Ethical Dilemmas in Cognitive Construction**

#### **5.2.1. The Alienation of Environmental Discourse from Instrumental Rationality**

In the communication practice of mainstream media, instrumental rationality sometimes distorts the expression of environmental topics. In order to pursue the communication effect and attract the audience's attention, the media often overemphasizes the external performance and immediate effect of environmental problems. When reporting environmental projects, the media tend to highlight the economic benefits and administrative achievements brought by these projects, but pay insufficient attention to their long-term impact on the ecological environment and sustainability. This instrumental rational orientation simplifies environmental discussion into a means to achieve a specific goal, depriving it of its own significance and value, thus hindering the public's accurate understanding and in-depth thinking on environmental issues.

#### **5.2.2. The Conflict between Commercial Logic and Environmental Publicness**

In order to get advertising fees and corporate sponsorship, news organizations may be influenced by commercial purposes when reporting environmental topics. Some media even deliberately beautify those enterprises that pollute the environment, or deliberately avoid the negative news of sponsors when reporting the environmental crisis. When business thinking gets into environmental communication, the fairness and neutrality of information sharing are destroyed. When people can't get true and comprehensive environmental information, their environmental awareness and cognitive development will also be hindered.

### **5.3. Strategies for Optimization**

#### **5.3.1. Enhancing Participatory Interaction in Environmental Discourse**

We should encourage everyone to take an active part in the discussion on environmental topics.

This requires the mainstream media to strengthen reporting on environmental issues. They can set up interactive channels or organize online and offline activities to encourage people to express their ideas. The media can also initiate discussions on specific environmental issues and invite experts, scholars and ordinary citizens to participate, thus establishing a diversified dialogue framework. When interacting, the media should respond to everyone's questions and concerns in time, so as to enhance everyone's sense of participation and belonging. Through such interactive participation, we can improve people's attention and understanding of environmental issues, and effectively encourage them to protect the environment.

### **5.3.2. Establishing a Cooperative Communication Network Involving Various Stakeholders**

A very important way to make the mainstream media better disseminate environmental information is to establish a multi-party cooperation network. This network can include government departments, environmental organizations, businesses, and the general public. The government can provide policy support and authoritative information; environmental organizations can share professional knowledge and practical experience; companies can assume social responsibilities and participate in promoting environmental protection projects; we, the public, can not only spread environmental information but also serve as supervisors. The media can collaborate with environmental protection organizations to host public welfare activities and produce comprehensive reports. They can also work with companies to promote green products and environmental protection technologies. By working together in this way, the spread and influence of environmental problems can grow, thereby improving the environmental awareness and participation of all of us.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this study, we use the theory of symbolic interactionism, and carefully study how the mainstream media influence the formation and operation of everyone's environmental cognition by setting topics on environmental topics. We found that the mainstream media created a "symbol field" for shaping people's environmental cognition by selecting and emphasizing certain topics, using special storytelling methods and using various symbols such as words and pictures. Setting the topic is not simply to transmit information to everyone, it is meaningful to discuss in the encoding and decoding stages, so that media symbols and everyone's cognition form an interactive cycle. This process can gradually lead people's environmental cognition from an "imaginary environment" to the real environment.

The construction of public environmental cognition shows a hierarchical structure. Mainstream media first establish initial cognition through issue salience, then shape deeper cognition through value-oriented symbolic narratives, which further influence behavioral intentions. This process is affected by factors such as public media literacy levels and group differences, resulting in diversified interpretations (confrontational, negotiated, etc.) and cognitive differentiation.

Our mainstream media have encountered several major problems in environmental communication: the contradiction between the right to speak globally and the right to speak locally, the fragmentation of the agenda under media integration, and the erosion of environmental publicity by instrumental rationality and business logic, all of which limit everyone's understanding of environmental issues. Strengthening everyone's participation and interaction and establishing a cooperative communication network with many partners are the key methods to optimize the communication effect.

From the perspective of symbolic interaction theory, this study clearly explains the relationship between media agenda setting and public environmental cognition, and provides theoretical reference for environmental communication practice. However, the influence of symbol differences in different media forms on cognitive construction has not been studied enough. Future research can further expand the scope and analyze the relationship between media types and cognitive effects more carefully, so that we can understand the law of cognitive construction in environmental communication more comprehensively.

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