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REVIEW

# The environmental agenda in alternative media in Ibero-America: key issues and challenges

# La agenda ambiental en medios de comunicación alternativos en Iberoamérica: claves y desafíos

Mabel Sánchez Torres[1]

[1]Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, España.

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**Corresponding Author**
Mabel Sánchez Torres

**ABSTRACT**

The article reflects on the challenges of the environmental agenda promoted by alternative media born in the digital environment. After a critical review of the scientific literature on the treatment of the subject in Ibero-America, the text aims to shed light on the debate on the concept of alternative journalism, understood as a journalistic practice that prioritizes the depth, veracity and added value of the information as opposed to the mercantilist and liberal sense of traditional media companies. In addition, it delves into the trends of the environmental agenda and the approach to climate change in particular, and points out the main challenges of alternative media to promote a sustainable agenda.

**Keywords:** Digital Native Media; Alternative Journalism; Environmental Agenda; Climate Change; Ibero-America.

**RESUMEN**

El artículo reflexiona en torno a los retos de la agenda ambiental impulsada por medios alternativos nacidos en el entorno digital. Luego de una revisión crítica de la literatura científica sobre el tratamiento del tema en Iberoamérica, el texto pretende aportar luces en el debate sobre el concepto de periodismo alternativo, entendido como una práctica periodística que prioriza la profundidad, veracidad y valor agregado de la información frente al sentido mercantilista y liberal de las empresas de comunicación tradicionales. Además, se ahonda en las tendencias de la agenda ambiental y el abordaje del cambio climático en particular y se señalan los principales retos de los medios alternativos para impulsar una agenda sostenible.

**Palabras clave:** Medios Nativos Digitales; Periodismo Alternativo; Agenda Medioambiental; Cambio Climático; Iberoamérica.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Alternative journalism, native digital media, and counter-hegemonic narratives

Alternative communication is becoming a fundamental concept in communication studies because it offers a critical vision that contrasts with the dominant liberal archetype (Barranquero & Sáez-Baeza, 2010). It has been approached from diverse theoretical and practical perspectives in both the Anglo-Saxon and Latin American contexts. In the United States and Europe, it has been associated mainly with countercultural movements and opposition to media capitalism (Mosco, 2006). On the other hand, Latin America has been closely linked to the search for social justice, the democratization of the media, the fight against authoritarian and neoliberal regimes, the abuse of power, and the scrutiny of elites (Martín-Barbero, 2008).

However, how is alternative journalism defined today beyond the oppositional sense of its origin? To answer the above question, we must start with the fact that there is no consensus on the exact definition of the term insofar as they are named interchangeably and sometimes without establishing clear limits in each definition. Among the most recurrent in the scientific literature, beyond the concept of "alternative," are: "radical" (Downing, 2000) and 'popular' (Kaplún, 1985) media, 'independent' (Somohano-Fernández, 2022), 'civic' (Fernandes, 2003) or 'collaborative' (Martínez & Ramos, 2020) journalism.

This academic article considers alternative journalism as a journalistic practice that distances itself from the traditional (Fleischman, Ginesta, and López Calzada, 2009). In this sense, it should be emphasized that these media prioritize the depth, veracity, and added value of information over a mercantilist sense. They often focus on so-called slow journalism, have public service purposes, and advocate for democratic strengthening, social change, and accountability to power using innovative tools.

However, although social networks and digital platforms promote the existence and development of an alternative communication system, it is dangerous and even naïve to believe that all media and discourses will have the same space and reach in the virtual sphere because reality points to the opposite. As in other scenarios, the large media empires dominate the market, whereas the smaller digital natives find it difficult to compete, at least in strictly numerical terms.

In terms of the characteristics of their productions, these types of journalistic projects stand out for 1. originality or novelty (they appeal to little-addressed issues and resort to experimental or innovative narratives), 2. quality and public service (they delve deeper into social issues), 3. openness and transparency of the information process (exercise of accountability to the public), 4. possibilities for audience participation and 5. sustainable model (they maintain their income from philanthropy, partnerships, services, or subscriptions) (Gabo Foundation, 2023).

## DEVELOPMENT

### The alternative environmental agenda and the focus on the climate crisis

Although alternative digital natives are distinguished by promoting counter-hegemonic values, the environmental agenda seems to be one of the points of most significant contradiction with the dominant system, if not the one most contradictory. As Carvalho (2007) points out, climate advocates have historically questioned the foundations of the deregulated capitalist system by demanding government intervention in large sectors of the economy, such as energy, fashion, and agriculture. This poses a direct threat to the archetype of the global society in which we live, unlike other social movements, such as feminism or anti-racism, which, although they demand rights for large majorities, do not directly attack the heart of capital.

Moreover, it is a form of journalistic specialization that challenges the status quo as it questions traditional policies that defend economic growth without considering environmental impacts (Lewandowsky, 2021). This position is even more critical when it comes to alternative media, which advocate for a green economy and legislation that protects ecosystems, promotes sustainability, and reduces dependence on fossil fuels (Aparicio, 2020).

Environmental journalism is defined as a form of journalism that uses elements from various scientific disciplines to explain natural phenomena; it involves philosophical, ethical, and cultural aspects; it anticipates adverse events; it requires long periods of research and specialized journalists, financial resources, consultations from different sources; and it aims to promote social change in pursuit of a more equitable and rational use of natural resources (González Cruz, 2007). Also noteworthy is the definition of Nauman (2019), who conceives of it as a cross-cutting issue in the coverage of any matter, but from the point of view of sustainability.

Furthermore, it is necessary to understand the mediation exerted by the political agenda in communicating the environmental agenda. Historically, the defense of the environment has been a cause associated with progressive or left-wing political tendencies insofar as it involves a strong criticism of the dominant economic model and demands regulations for large sectors, contrary to the liberal interests of the oligarchies and right-wing political parties or groups (Carvalho, 2007; Parratt et al., 2020; Lewandowsky, 2021).

In this sense, alternative media have played a fundamental role in highlighting the relationship of the environment with other social issues such as poverty, inequality, and resource exploitation (Nauman, 2019; Aparicio, 2020) from an intersectional perspective. At the same time, they have been crucial in putting pressure on governments and companies to take action.

Towards a sustainable future: Notes for Alternative Media Latin America and the Caribbean are some areas suffering the most significant damage associated with climate change and disasters (IDMC, 2022). The regional outlook is worsening due to impoverishment, inequality, population growth, and the absence of sound sustainable development policies. However, the governments of these countries only allocate 0,18 % of their GDP to counteracting the environmental crisis. In comparison, 63,6 % of the nations studied do not recognize the right to a healthy environment in their Constitutions (Cerecedo, 2022).

In Spain, the phenomenon takes on other nuances. Firstly, it is worth noting that from 2021 to 2022 alone, the number of forest fires and the area burned was four times higher than the average from 2006 to 2021 (IDMC, 2023). There has also been a record increase in temperatures and the duration of heat waves.

This country was second in Europe and Central Asia regarding the number of internally displaced persons (31 000) due to natural disasters in 2022 (IDMC, 2023). However, it topped the historical list between 2008 and 2019, with 64 360 people forced to leave their territories.

The context described, in turn, leads to a series of challenges for journalism and, in particular, for alternative media. It is that, together with the inconsistency in the coverage of the environment in the first decades of this century (Teso-Alonso et al., 2021), climate misinformation is a threat primarily associated with conservative political discourse and whose origin goes back to economics and not scientific reasons (Boussalis & Coan, 2016).

Skepticism often alludes to populist movements, which provide financial support to oppose implementing policies and media initiatives that promote environmental causes (Lewandowsky, 2021). The politicization of the phenomenon has been corroborated by a report from the Reuters Institute (Ejaz et al., 2023), which states that governments (12 %), as well as politicians and parties (13 %), are cited as sources of disinformation about the climate crisis. Added to this is the over-representation by the media of a minority skeptical of the scientific consensus (Parratt et al., 2020).

Adaptation to the digital environment has also become a key factor for sustainability. These media's capacity to involve the community and encourage readers' active participation becomes more relevant in a context where trust in traditional business models is affected (Rodríguez Pallares & Pérez Serrano, 2022). Transparency and collaboration in decision-making are essential elements for maintaining economic viability and editorial independence in a more horizontal and collectivized scheme (Capoano, 2018).

Last but not least is the issue of journalists' safety, who often face various types of attacks and threats, especially in countries with high levels of corruption and drug trafficking. According to a report by Punto de Inflexión, 50% of independent digital native media suffered cyberattacks in 2017 (Nauman, 2019). In addition to these cyber risks, environmental journalists often work for low wages and in small teams, which makes it even more dangerous to scrutinize those in power.

Indeed, a UNESCO report (2024) reveals that in the last 15 years, more than 44 reporters covering environmental issues have been murdered, and at least 24 others have survived murder attempts. Even so, creating professional associations throughout Latin America, inspired by the Society of Environmental Journalists in the United States, demonstrates the commitment and resilience of those who dedicate themselves to this type of journalism (Nauman, 2019).

In summary, the following table lists the main challenges identified by these media outlets in their work to report on and raise the profile of issues related to climate change and sustainability, as well as possible responses. This list is generic and should, therefore, be adapted to each country or region's specific needs and contexts.

| CHALLENGES OF ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM IN CLIMATE COVERAGE |
|---|
| **1. Climate misinformation and inconsistency in environmental coverage** |
| • Prioritize data verification and the dissemination of information based on scientific evidence.<br>• Adopt discursive strategies that emphasize sustainability as a framework for social agreement.<br>• Make visible the link between energy generation and the unregulated exploitation of natural resources in the face of greenhouse gas emissions.<br>• Strengthen the scientific and environmental journalism sections as specialized areas and provide cross-disciplinary training to all professionals.<br>• Promote media literacy campaigns on the environment and climate in partnership with other institutions. |
| **2. Invisibility of alternative media** |
| • Develop visibility and positioning strategies on social networks and conventional media<br>• Promote the frequency and continuity of quality information on climate change, focusing not only on its impacts but also on its causes and solutions.<br>• Produce content for young people as key actors in sustainable social and environmental change.<br>• Disseminate citizen initiatives and champion solutions-based journalism that engages and motivates audiences.<br>• Produce content in multiple languages and dialects to reach a wider audience.<br>• Incorporate local narratives and perspectives into content.<br>• Implement participatory platforms where audiences can contribute ideas and opinions. Hold community events and workshops to strengthen the connection between the media and the audience.<br>• Form alliances with other alternative and community media outlets for content redistribution. |
| **3. Financing limitations** |
| • Seek diverse sources of funding such as grants, advertising, consulting, and reader contributions.<br>• Promote transparency and active community participation in the economic management of the environment. |
| **4. Risks to the safety of environmental journalists** |
| • Implement cybersecurity measures to protect data integrity and the privacy of journalists.<br>• Establish support and solidarity networks among journalists to address threats.<br>• Strengthen the legal and physical protection of journalists, including psychological support and security training.<br>• Advocate for the protection of press freedom and the safety of journalists before government agencies and international organizations. |
| **5. Little university training in environmental journalism** |
| • Include courses related to environmental journalism in university curricula and establish alliances between alternative media and educational institutions to generate mutual training projects.<br>• Invest in ongoing training in new technologies and digital communication tools for journalists. |
| **6. Censorship and political pressure** |

**Figure 1.** Challenges for alternative journalism in promoting and covering the climate agenda

At this point, several lessons should be emphasized. As Teso-Alonso et al. (2021) suggest, it is essential to promote the frequency and continuity of quality information on climate change, focusing not only on its impacts but also its causes and solutions. Furthermore, it is crucial to approach the problem from a climate justice perspective and to connect the phenomenon with local realities (Aparicio, 2020).

It is also important to publicize citizens' initiatives and defend critical and independent journalism, renouncing trivialization and the search for a false balance. It is urgent to popularize the necessary specific terminology and connect climate change with health issues and extreme meteorological phenomena (Teso-Alonso et al., 2021).

In addition to the above actions, alternative media must reinforce discursive strategies that emphasize sustainability as a framework for social agreement and make visible the link between energy generation and greenhouse gas emissions, together with the accessibility of available mitigation and adaptation tools. Recognizing the losses and damages and delimiting responsibilities in the face of the climate crisis is also an unavoidable task for the media, especially for this type of journalistic project.

That is why it is essential to increase journalistic specialization in climate change both quantitatively and qualitatively (Gotopo, 2013). As Fernández-Reyes (2010) states, environmental journalism has acquired sufficient maturity to be considered specialized journalism, with a solid research methodology, "associations of professionals, an important social function and a specific demand from society." Likewise, it is a key tool in the fight against climate misinformation (Fernández-Castrillo & Magallón-Rosa, 2023).

Similarly, solutions journalism stands out as a valuable proposition, identifying this type of journalistic project (Aparicio, 2020). By focusing on citizen initiatives, effective public policies, and technological innovations that contribute to mitigating climate change, alternative media succeed in engaging audiences. They can motivate them to participate in initiatives that promote more sustainable consumption models (Aguado-Guadalupe & Bernaola, 2022).

Including subjects related to environmental journalism in university curricula is seen as another urgent matter, as it is crucial to prepare future communication professionals to address the challenges of climate change and sustainability (Fernandez-Reyes, 2010). However, the reality is that these subjects do not yet have an established place in the university structure, and their integration into the curriculum is limited, with a notable lack of teachers working in this line of research. In this sense, establishing alliances between alternative media and educational institutions can be an effective strategy to strengthen the training of future environmental journalists.

## CONCLUSIONS

Alternative media appeal to a discourse that delves into the impacts, causes, and possible solutions to the climate and environmental crisis from local and participatory perspectives. These projects mobilize society toward climate action by giving visibility to community initiatives and effective public policies.

The Ibero-American panorama presents particular challenges and opportunities. In Latin America and the Caribbean, factors such as inequality, poverty, and high vulnerability to natural disasters exacerbate the effects of climate change. However, the region's rich tradition of community journalism and social struggle provides fertile ground for promoting a strong environmental agenda. On the other hand, in Spain, with a different socioeconomic context, recent legislation on climate change and the sustainable energy transition offers a favorable framework for journalistic action. However, the European nation must face disinformation and increased extreme weather events such as heat waves or forest fires.

In the future, it will be essential for alternative media to implement strategies that allow them to overcome current challenges and strengthen their impact. This includes diversifying their funding sources, improving their digital presence, and strengthening collaborative networks with other organizations and media outlets. Investing in the continuous training of journalists in environmental issues and new technologies is also crucial. The adoption of narrative and analytical journalism, which offers an in-depth understanding of the climate crisis and its many facets, is emerging as a key to maintaining differentiated value compared to traditional competitors.

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None.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORSHIP

*Conceptualization:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Data curation:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Formal analysis:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Research:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Methodology:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Project administration:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Resources:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Software:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Supervision:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Validation:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.

*Visualization:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Writing – original draft:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.
*Writing – review & editing:* Mabel Sánchez Torres.

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