

GREEN ECONOMY CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE MEDIA'S ROLE AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract. Ask what the green economy actually requires of the public and the answer quickly becomes uncomfortable: not just awareness, but a working understanding of carbon pricing mechanisms, lifecycle assessments, circular supply chains, and regulatory compliance frameworks. That gap—between what green economy literacy requires and what the news actually delivers—is what this paper is about. We argue it is not accidental. Drawing on Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), and Boykoff and Boykoff's (2004) work on false balance, we trace the structural pressures that cause even well-resourced coverage to fall short. Our case studies—Blue Planet II, the “Exxon Knew” investigations, and Falkenberg et al.'s (2022) analysis of viral climate discourse—point toward a consistent pattern: as media attention to environmental issues grows and intensifies emotionally, it tends to leave audiences more anxious than informed, and less capable of action rather than more. We evaluate the EU Anti-Greenwashing Directive and the Digital Services Act as regulatory responses, identify the implementation gaps that persist, and argue that recommendations focused only on journalistic practice miss the deeper problem. The architecture of commercially dependent, algorithmically optimized media is not incidentally hostile to green economy communication—it is structurally so.

Keywords: green economy, sustainable development, media framing, greenwashing, environmental journalism, agenda-setting, framing theory, information disorder

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1. Introduction

Start with the definition and the problem becomes visible immediately. UNEP (2011) describes the green economy as “low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive”—which sounds straightforward until you try to explain it in a 90-second television segment, a tweet, or a banner advertisement. The substance of the concept resists the formats through which most people receive their information about the world. Carbon markets, biodiversity offsetting, scope 3 emissions accounting, just transition frameworks: none of these are simple, none unfold on the timescale of a news cycle, and none produce the kind of visible, dramatic event that editorial teams regard as a news peg. That tension—between the technical depth of green policy and the structural incentives of media production—is the central subject of this paper.

None of this is a case against environmental journalism as such. Coverage of the climate has grown considerably since Paris, and some of it has mattered: certain documentaries have shifted consumer habits in ways researchers can trace, some investigations have ended up in court, and digital campaigns have brought people onto the streets in numbers that would have seemed unlikely a decade ago. The problem is not absence of coverage. It is that the coverage we have systematically reproduces certain kinds of misunderstanding—between urgency and despair, between corporate greenwashing and accountability, between individual guilt and structural reform—in ways that serve commercial media logic far better than they serve the green transition. Sustainable Development Goal 16.10 recognizes free information flow as foundational to the entire 2030 Agenda (MDIF, 2023). The uncomfortable question is whether current media structures can actually deliver that function, or whether the architecture of algorithmic platforms, advertising dependencies, and specialist capacity shortfalls makes genuine green economy communication something of a structural impossibility under present conditions.

This paper works through that question in three moves. We first set out the theoretical framework—agenda-setting and framing theory, plus the concept of false balance—that explains why well-resourced, well-intentioned journalism can still systematically distort public understanding of complex policy. From there, we turn to case studies that show, concretely, where media campaigns have worked and where they have not, and try to explain the difference. The final section takes stock of the regulatory and industry responses that have followed and assesses how much ground they can actually cover. Running through all of this is a single claim: that better environmental journalism is not mainly a question of editors making better choices. It is a question of whether the institutional conditions under which journalism is produced make good choices possible at all.

2. How Agenda-Setting and Framing Shape Green Economy Perception

The core proposition of McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting research is elegantly simple: the media does not tell people what to think, but it is remarkably effective at determining what they think about. Their 1968 U.S. presidential election study established that the issues audiences regarded as most important closely tracked the issues receiving the most coverage, regardless of prior political commitments. The agenda-setting effect, in other words, operates independently of opinion change. Applied to green economy communication, this has a troubling implication. When coverage focuses intensively on dramatic weather events and apocalyptic projections but gives sparse, technically thin attention to the policy mechanisms—carbon pricing, green public procurement, circular economy regulation—required to actually address those events, it produces exactly the pattern Janošková, Hák, and Moldan (2019) document: high public concern, low policy literacy. People know something is wrong; they have much less idea what to do about it, or what governments and corporations are actually being asked to do.

Entman's (1993) framing theory tells us that it is not only which issues get covered that matters, but how. Frames select certain aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient than others; they define problems, assign causes, make moral judgments, and suggest what remedies might be appropriate (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Environmental journalism characteristically deploys three dominant frames. The conflict frame—environmentalists against

industry—reduces complex regulatory questions to a zero-sum contest. The economic cost frame foregrounds short-term financial impact at the expense of long-term benefit analysis. The scientific uncertainty frame, the most consequential, presents a settled empirical consensus as a live debate. Each of these frames has specific and damaging effects on public understanding of what a green economy transition would actually involve.

The scientific uncertainty frame is perhaps the most extensively studied. Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) analyzed U.S. prestige press coverage of climate science across fourteen years, from 1988 to 2002, and found that 53% of articles gave roughly equal weight to anthropogenic causes of warming and to the position of a small minority of skeptic scientists—a practice the authors name “balance as bias.” The professional norm of journalistic balance, applied to a scientific question where 97–99% of peer-reviewed literature supports a single conclusion, does not produce fair coverage. It manufactures the impression of a genuine scientific debate where the science itself records no such thing. Some outlets have since moved to address this: The Guardian’s 2019 editorial guidelines explicitly prohibited the false-balance convention and introduced language—“climate crisis,” “climate emergency”—calibrated to reflect the scientific consensus rather than political convention (Carrington, 2019). The shift matters, but it remains contested within journalism itself, and far from universal.

Two further theoretical contributions are worth naming here. Hajer (1995) introduced the concept of “discourse coalitions” to describe how corporate actors actively construct narratives that link environmental responsibility to brand identity—what he calls ecological modernization as an ideological move rather than an operational one. When media reproduce these narratives without independent verification, they are not failing to do their job; they are doing it in a way that serves corporate communication interests rather than public understanding. Habermas’s (1989) earlier work on the structural transformation of the public sphere gives this a wider theoretical frame: market colonization of communicative space corrupts the rational-critical discourse that democratic societies require to deliberate on shared problems. Green economy policy is, right now, one of the most consequential of those shared problems.

3. What Case Studies Actually Reveal

3.1 Blue Planet II: Framing That Works, and Why It Only Goes So Far

Consider what the BBC’s 2017 *Blue Planet II* actually achieved, and then consider what it did not. On the positive side of the ledger: an estimated 88% of UK viewers who watched the series reported changing their behaviour around single-use plastics (Rapid Transition Alliance, 2019), single-use plastic legislation accelerated in both the UK and EU, and the series contributed to what media analysts began calling “the Attenborough effect.” The mechanism here is analytically interesting. The series did not simply make ocean plastic more prominent—it re-framed it, moving from a diffuse environmental indicator to a specific, viscerally present threat to ecosystems that decades of Attenborough narration had made morally legible to a large audience. That is second-level agenda-setting in McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) sense: shaping not just which issue matters but which attributes of the issue become salient.

Worth noting, though, is which plastic the resulting legislation actually went after. Straws, carrier bags, disposable cutlery—objects consumers recognize and interact with daily.

These are also, in volume terms, a small fraction of total ocean-bound plastic. Agricultural and industrial waste streams, considerably larger in scale and considerably harder to photograph, attracted far less regulatory attention (Janošková et al., 2019). The documentary achieved a genuine policy win. It also illustrates how media-driven environmental campaigns tend to locate the problem in individual consumer choices rather than in industrial production structures, which is precisely the framing that suits both commercial media logic and the interests of the industries that generate the majority of the problem. Media-driven policy wins can be real and partial simultaneously. We should celebrate neither too quickly.

3.2 The “Exxon Knew” Series: What Good Investigative Journalism Looks Like

The contrast with investigative journalism that genuinely follows the evidence regardless of commercial consequence is instructive. The “Exxon Knew” series—reported from 2015 across InsideClimate News, the Los Angeles Times, and the Columbia School of Journalism—showed that ExxonMobil’s own research teams had reached confident conclusions about anthropogenic warming decades before the corporation began funding organized skepticism (Carrington, 2019). The fallout was concrete: shareholder lawsuits, regulatory scrutiny, and a genuine shift in how institutional investors began thinking about long-term climate liability. This is environmental journalism functioning as genuine accountability journalism should.

By comparison, reporting on the Bank of America Tower’s inflated LEED certification claims produced calls for stronger building standards and not much else (Rethinking the Future, 2023). The difference partly reflects the scale of the actors involved. But it also reflects a structural constraint: investigative environmental journalism requires journalists who can read scientific papers, interpret corporate sustainability disclosures, understand regulatory frameworks, and distinguish between a genuine lifecycle carbon assessment and a document designed to look like one. Boykoff (2011) notes that scientific inaccuracy rates in environmental coverage are substantially higher when articles are written by non-specialist reporters—which, as environment desks have been cut across the industry, now describes a growing majority of environmental coverage. The skill gap is not abstract. It shapes what gets exposed and what does not.

3.3 Digital Activism: The Paradox of the Platform

The amplification of Greta Thunberg’s Fridays for Future campaign from 2018 onward is frequently cited as evidence that social media has democratized climate advocacy. And up to a point it has. The dynamic was real: Thunberg’s early posts achieved viral reach that forced mainstream outlets to cover the school strikes, traditional coverage then lent the movement the institutional credibility that converted social media attention into governmental responses, and climate emergency declarations followed in multiple jurisdictions by 2019 (BBC News, 2024). The feedback loop between digital and traditional media produced genuine policy-facing pressure.

What this account omits is that the same platform logic amplifies counter-narratives with comparable enthusiasm. Falkenberg et al. (2022) tracked Twitter climate discourse around major international summits and found something sobering: tightly coordinated networks of skeptic accounts, despite modest membership, were generating engagement that outpaced fact-based coverage from established outlets during the windows that mattered most. The platform

architecture does not weigh the accuracy of a climate science article against a denialist thread—it rewards whichever produces more engagement, and conspiratorial content tends to win that competition, because anger and alarm hold attention longer than information does. This is not a peripheral problem that moderation teams will eventually solve. It is endemic to the business model.

4. Why Green Economy Communication Keeps Failing: Structural Causes

4.1 Greenwashing Is a Media Structure Problem, Not a Bad-Actor Problem

BP’s “Beyond Petroleum” rebranding, launched in 2000, is the canonical greenwashing case study for good reason. The campaign was sophisticated, well-funded, and widely covered as a story of genuine corporate transformation at the same time that more than 96% of the company’s capital expenditure remained directed at fossil fuel extraction (Earth Day, 2022). But the more revealing question is not “why did BP do this?”—the commercial logic is obvious—but “why did so many media outlets reproduce the narrative without critical interrogation?” Part of the answer is advertising dependence. Newsrooms whose revenue is substantially generated by energy, automotive, and industrial clients are structurally disinclined toward the kind of adversarial coverage that would jeopardize those relationships. This is not conspiracy; it is the mundane result of economic incentives.

Hajer’s (1995) framework of ecological modernization as ideology names the mechanism precisely. When outlets accept the premise that market actors are voluntarily decarbonizing—that the green transition is essentially a story of corporate responsibility rather than regulatory compulsion—they foreclose the framing that would actually test that claim. Readers receive greenwashing as reported fact rather than as a claim requiring verification, and their resulting political conclusions—that the private sector is managing the transition and strong regulation is therefore unnecessary—are exactly what the companies communicating those narratives want them to draw. Oreskes and Conway’s (2010) historical account of organized science denial documents how deliberate this dynamic has often been: corporate investment in manufacturing narrative uncertainty yields measurable returns in delayed regulation, and the calculation has been made explicitly by corporate strategists in internal documents that have since become public.

4.2 Algorithmic Amplification and the Information Disorder Problem

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) introduced the term “information disorder” to describe what happens when misinformation, disinformation, and what they call malinformation—true information used to cause harm—circulate at scales and velocities that correction-based journalism cannot match. Green economy communication sits at the sharp end of this problem. The COP26 data from Falkenberg et al. (2022) showed climate denial content outperforming factual journalism in raw engagement terms—and this was not a one-off. The same dynamic appears across climate summits, which points toward something structural rather than incidental: when you design a platform to maximize engagement, you have already tilted the information environment against the kind of sober, complex reporting the green transition depends on.

The policy consequences are less discussed than they should be. When coordinated messaging frames carbon pricing as a regressive tax—a claim that is empirically conditional on

how revenue is recycled, but is almost never presented with that conditionality attached—the political cost of carbon pricing legislation rises in ways that do not respond proportionally to factual counter-messaging. Legislators in high-exposure constituencies are not operating in an information environment where the best argument wins. They are operating in one where the most emotionally resonant, most algorithmically amplified claim shapes the feasibility of their political choices. Understanding this is a prerequisite for understanding why technically sound green economy policies so often stall or are diluted in the legislative process.

4.3 Climate Fatigue: When Urgency Framing Produces Its Own Opposite

One of the more uncomfortable findings in recent environmental communication research is that amplifying alarm does not straightforwardly translate into political mobilization. Hickman et al. (2021) surveyed 10,000 young people across ten countries; three quarters said they found the future frightening, and nearly half reported that climate anxiety was already affecting how they functioned day to day. That is not a description of a public primed for action. It is a description of an anxious one—and anxiety, research consistently shows, tends toward withdrawal rather than engagement when people perceive the scale of a problem as exceeding their capacity to respond. Repeated catastrophic framing without any concurrent sense of proximate agency generates what researchers call climate fatigue: concern that registers as high but produces little in the way of behaviour or political pressure (Earth Day, 2022).

The inverse failure—solutionism, coverage that foregrounds green technology breakthroughs and policy victories without conveying the scale of what remains to be done—is equally common and equally damaging, for different reasons. Premature reassurance undermines the sustained political pressure that genuinely ambitious decarbonization requires. Striking that balance—clear about the stakes without tipping into the kind of dread that shuts people down—is exactly the challenge Nisbet and Mooney (2007) had in mind when they argued that effective science communication has to adapt its register to its audience rather than defaulting to a single approach. Doing that well is not a formula but a craft, and it takes both expertise and the editorial space to exercise it. Both are in short supply.

4.4 Capacity and Geography: Who Gets to Tell the Story

The contraction of dedicated environment desks at major news organizations through the 2010s is well documented, and its consequences for coverage quality are measurable. Boykoff (2011) finds substantially higher rates of scientific inaccuracy in environmental articles authored by generalist rather than specialist reporters. As the proportion of environmental coverage written by non-specialists has grown—driven by budget cuts accelerated by the collapse of digital advertising revenues—coverage has become more dependent on institutional press releases, which are of course produced by the same organizations that have the strongest interest in controlling how their environmental performance is framed.

There is also a geographic dimension to this problem that academic literature has been slower to address than it should be. Environmental journalism is heavily concentrated in major outlets from wealthy countries. The perspectives, priorities, and vulnerabilities of frontline communities in the Global South—where climate change is not a future threat but a present one, and where the green economy transition involves difficult choices about development pathways that wealthy countries largely resolved decades ago—are systematically underrepresented in the

coverage that shapes international policy deliberation (MDIF, 2023). Any analysis of media's role in the green transition that focuses only on Guardian editorial guidelines or FTC greenwashing policy is, by definition, talking about a small and relatively privileged slice of the global media landscape.

5. What Regulatory and Industry Responses Have Actually Achieved

5.1 The EU Anti-Greenwashing Directive: Real Progress, Real Limitations

The EU's Anti-Greenwashing Directive, adopted in March 2024, is the most substantive regulatory intervention in this space to date, and it is worth being specific about what it does. It requires that environmental claims in commercial communications be substantiated with independently verifiable lifecycle data before publication; it creates a random audit mechanism; and it sets financial penalties at up to 4% of annual turnover—a number that deliberately echoes GDPR enforcement logic, on the theory that deterrence requires that the penalty be large enough to matter to the company's financial planning (Robinson, 2022). Germany and France have already seen enforcement actions prompt the withdrawal of misleading campaigns from several major consumer brands—early evidence that the deterrent works when governments actually use it.

The Digital Services Act, which reached full operation in mid-2023, pushes this logic further by pulling the platform layer into regulatory scope. Very Large Online Platforms are now required to identify systemic risks—climate disinformation is named explicitly—and to put in place mitigation measures that can be independently audited. Preliminary DSA audits have confirmed what researchers had suspected: platform algorithms amplify climate-denialist content beyond what user preferences alone would explain, meaning that the platform architecture is actively contributing to the information disorder problem, not merely failing to prevent user-driven misinformation. The regulatory implication—that algorithmic design constitutes a form of editorial decision-making that can be held accountable—is significant and contested.

What these regulations do not do is close the international arbitrage gap. The FTC's updated Green Guides, effective January 2025, are advisory rather than binding (Gowling WLG, 2024). A multinational corporation facing strict standards in the EU faces nothing comparable in the United States, and can calibrate its communications accordingly. Without convergent international standards, the EU approach—however well-designed domestically—remains a partial solution to what is structurally a global problem.

5.2 Editorial Self-Governance: What Voluntary Reform Has and Has Not Produced

The Guardian's 2019 decision to revise its climate style guide is the most cited example of voluntary editorial reform in this domain. Replacing “climate change” with “climate crisis” and “climate emergency,” prohibiting sponsored content from high-emission industries, and committing to periodic accuracy audits represented a genuine institutional choice to prioritize scientific accuracy over the false-balance norm (Carrington, 2019). Post-implementation review at The Guardian reportedly showed a 30% reduction in reader complaints about greenwashing coverage. That is a meaningful outcome—though causal attribution is complicated by the fact that public climate concern was rising independently during the same period.

Fact-checking consortia coordinated through the International Fact-Checking Network have expanded into environmental specialization. During COP28, joint IFCN bulletins reportedly corrected over 120 erroneous claims within 24 hours of publication. That is a real operational success. The harder problem is one that fact-checking cannot solve on its own: corrections consistently reach far fewer people than the original false claims, and nothing in the available data suggests this asymmetry is narrowing. Fact-checking is necessary. It is not sufficient.

Reader-funded models and foundation-supported investigative outlets—Pulitzer Center grantees are the most visible examples—show credible early evidence that longer-horizon environmental investigations are possible without the commercial interference that advertising dependence produces. Scandinavian and Canadian journalism trust fund experiments suggest that publicly supported models can enable year-long investigative projects with genuine policy impact. The unresolved question is editorial independence from public funders. That question deserves a serious answer, not a reassuring wave.

5.3 What Coordinated Reform Would Actually Require

What would actually move things—rather than nudging them—would have to be institutional in nature. A Global Media Sustainability Council, bringing together regulators, journalists, environmental scientists, and civil society on a permanent basis, could fill the enforcement gap that even well-designed regional frameworks like the EU’s leave open. Standardized protocols for verifying environmental claims, grounded in open-source emissions data and requiring independent audit as a precondition for publication, would give accountability journalism something it currently lacks: a shared evidentiary floor.

Fellowship programmes placing journalists inside scientific institutions and regulatory agencies—for months at a time, not days—would begin to close the specialist gap in a way that is actually scaled to the problem. On the audience side, media literacy curricula in schools and universities that teach people how to read environmental claims and spot greenwashing would build the kind of critical public that commercial media currently has little incentive to cultivate. And properly resourced longitudinal research partnerships between newsrooms and academic institutions—tracking not just what audiences click on but what they actually do differently as a result—would, for the first time, give the field an evidence base on which to iterate. We know far less than we should about which journalistic choices actually change policy outcomes. That ignorance is itself a problem worth treating as one.

Conclusion

None of what we have argued here suggests that journalism is uniquely responsible for the slow pace of the green economy transition. Technology, finance, geopolitics, and organized political opposition all bear substantial weight. But the structural failures of media communication that this paper has traced are not peripheral to the problem either. A public that receives green economy information primarily through urgency-saturated catastrophism, corporate narrative reproduction, and algorithmically amplified misinformation is not a public well-equipped to deliberate effectively on the policy choices that the transition requires. The

knowledge-transfer function that SDG 16.10 treats as essential to the entire 2030 Agenda is, under present media conditions, being partially but consequentially short-circuited.

The tension between media sensationalism and the technical depth of green policy is worth stating plainly: it is not a bug in an otherwise functioning system. It is a predictable output of commercial media architecture optimized for engagement rather than understanding. The theoretical frameworks this paper has drawn on reach a convergent conclusion. Agenda-setting research (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) tells us that what gets covered shapes what the public regards as mattering; framing research (Entman, 1993) tells us that how it gets covered shapes which responses people consider thinkable. Measured against those criteria, the coverage that currently exists is producing public priorities and public solution-spaces that are both narrower than the transition requires.

Good environmental journalism—the kind that names greenwashing rather than reproducing it, translates policy complexity rather than flattening it, carries the voices of frontline communities rather than erasing them, and maintains accountability pressure rather than relaxing it—can make a genuine difference. The catch is that it cannot do this on its own, and it cannot do it at all without certain conditions in place: independence from advertiser pressure, access to specialist knowledge, meaningful regulatory constraints on platforms, and the institutional support that makes sustained investigative work viable. Creating those conditions is not, ultimately, a question about journalism. It is a question about the political economy in which journalism operates. Treating it as the former, and placing the burden of change on individual reporters and editors, is precisely how reform stays stuck.

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