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Building the news media agenda on the environment: a comparison of public relations and journalistic sources

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Abstract

Critics have accused public relations practitioners of providing materials to journalists that promote an environmental backlash agenda and lack news value. This content analysis study compares two types of information subsidies provided to members of the Society of Environmental Journalists: public relations materials mailed to members and news tipsheets put together by SEJ for the use of their members. Results suggest that although the critics' charges have some merit, the preponderance of materials promoting a backlash agenda stem from just a few public relations sources. Additionally, although the news tipsheets possessed more overall news value, the public relations materials possessed more overall news utility for journalists. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In 1995 the Center for Media & Democracy published *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies, and the Public Relations Industry*, in which authors Stauber and Rampton¹ charge public relations practitioners with selling out the environment and forsaking public health concerns in favor of the economic bottom line. According to these and other critics, public relations firms representing corporate interests are fueling the environmental backlash movement, which claims that environmental risks have been overplayed in the media and that less costly actions and regulations are sufficient to preserve the environment and protect human safety.² While the book outlines real, egregious misuses of public relations efforts to

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downplay environmental hazards, it presents these few cases as if they are the norm and journalists as unwitting dupes who never exercise news judgment or initiative.

To determine if Stauber and Rampton's anecdotal claims possess empirical validity, this study examines two sources of information subsidies supplied to members of the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) over a one-year period: (1) public relations materials mailed to SEJ members, and (2) story tipsheets assembled by SEJ staffers for members. A content analysis of these materials was performed to determine if significant differences exist between the issues, sources, tone, news worthiness, and utility of the materials supplied to environmental journalists by public relations practitioners and those supplied by their peers.

Environmental coverage and agenda building theory

Following publication of *Silent Spring* and the start of the environmental movement in the early 1970s, environmental journalism became a specialized beat and environmental issues became a top concern of corporate public relations practitioners.³ Although the recession of the late 1980s caused environmental issues to take a back seat to the economy, the environment remains near the top of the public, corporate, and media agendas.⁴ In recent years, however, the environmental backlash movement, which proposes that the environment is not in as bad shape as media reports have suggested and that more scrutiny should be given to the economic ramifications of proposed environmental actions,⁵ has gained strength. While critics charge public relations professionals with fueling the backlash, prominent environmental journalists have publicly joined the backlash, claiming many reporters have lost their objectivity and become advocates instead. As one notes: "There's a tradition in environment writing of giving an unquestioning alarmist spin to the stories."⁶

The tenor of the media's environmental agenda is important because studies suggest a significant media agenda-setting effect for environmental issues: the public relies heavily on the media for information about the environment, and a strong correlation has been found between the media and public agendas.⁷ In turn, the media's environmental agenda is highly dependent on the agenda-building efforts of sources, who provide information subsidies to the media to ultimately influence public and policy agendas.⁸ Early studies found that 85% of environmental reporters relied on press releases for information and 82% relied on brochures, pamphlets, and other reports.⁹ Twenty years later, Griffin and Dunwoody¹⁰ confirmed that local press environmental coverage often uses the least costly, most readily available sources of information.

Previous agenda-building studies, however, have found that journalists prefer information from sources whom they perceive as having no obvious self-serving economic purpose—that is, government agencies and nonprofits.¹¹ In Witt's 1974 study,¹² the most frequently used sources were government conservation agencies. More recent content analyses of newspaper, magazine, and television news broadcast coverage confirmed that government sources were the most commonly cited, with a slight rise over time noted for nonprofit sources as well.¹³ In a 1993 survey of journalists' sources of environmental data, 51% listed government officials, press releases, and reports as their first source of information, while 25% listed environmental activists and groups. Business and industry officials and news releases garnered only a 1% mention.¹⁴ A 1995 survey of environmental journalists, however, found

that university sources were considered the most credible, followed by government sources and environmental groups. Business sources were a very credible source for only 6% of these respondents.¹⁵

Conversely, while nonprofit sources usually possess credibility for journalists, studies demonstrate that environmental groups are better at placing individual items on the media agenda than they are at framing coverage of those items because of their activist stance.¹⁶ Recent studies have shown that environmental advocacy groups are becoming increasingly media savvy, however, targeting information to specific media, monitoring coverage, and cultivating a more research-based image, resulting in more successful agenda-building efforts.¹⁷

Sources often used by journalists to provide an opposing side and thus “objective” coverage are spokespeople from membership or trade associations.¹⁸ But critics, including *Toxic Sludge* authors Stauber and Rampton, contend many of these groups are funded and populated in part or in whole by industries with a definite agenda, who hire public relations practitioners to shape media coverage that obfuscates these industry ties. They note that 10 public relations firms earned more than \$75,000,000 total in 1993 for lobbying and working on environmental issues.¹⁹

Focus of this study and hypotheses

To date, most research has centered on the agenda-setting role of the media. This study fills a gap in the literature by examining agenda-building efforts of public relations and journalistic sources through an analysis of information subsidies provided to the approximately 1,200 members of the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ). Formed by 20 journalists in 1990, SEJ is the fastest growing journalism association in the United States,²⁰ and it takes active measures to prevent anyone engaged in public relations from obtaining membership.

For this study, information subsidies supplied to SEJ members for a one-year period from two sources were examined. SEJ sells its membership list on clearly marked mailing labels; all labeled information subsidy materials received by an SEJ member during this time period were collected for analysis. Additionally, SEJ publishes tipsheets every other week that contain approximately four briefs each of possible environmental stories meant to serve as “a guide to upcoming environmental news.”²¹ Two SEJ members assemble the tipsheet briefs, with contributions solicited from the entire membership. All briefs published during this same period were downloaded from the Web for analysis.

Four hypotheses were developed to empirically test the claims made by critics such as Stauber and Rampton in *Toxic Sludge* and to explore the differences in information subsidies supplied by public relations sources with those from journalistic sources.

H1 SEJ tipsheet briefs will most frequently cite government or education sources; mailed public relations materials will most often originate from corporations and from trade/membership associations.

H2 SEJ tipsheet briefs will more often concern policy and human health/safety issues than will mailed public relations materials.

H3 Mailed public relations materials will more often than not omit explicit funding information.

H4 SEJ tipsheet briefs will more often be neutral in tone and less often backlash in tone than will mailed public relations materials.

A fifth hypothesis tested conventional journalistic wisdom on the lack of news worthiness and utility of public relations materials compared to their own materials and provides a measure of how likely journalists were to actually use the materials provided from both sources.²²

H5 SEJ tipsheet briefs will possess more inherent news worthiness and overall utility to journalists than will mailed public relations materials.

2. Materials and methods

Two independent coders analyzed all materials using the methodology outlined by Holsti and Berelson.²³ Coding categories and combined frequencies are given in Appendix A. Materials were coded for source of information (e.g., government; when multiple sources were given the source mentioned first was the one coded) and for predominant topic (e.g., climate). Note was made whether the funding source was explicitly given in a phrase such as “Funding was provided by.” The tone of the material was coded according to whether it portrayed the environment as in trouble (advocacy), in better shape than previously thought (backlash), or neutral.

To determine news worthiness, the primary news value (i.e., timeliness, impact, prominence, proximity, conflict, and unique/bizarre) was coded as were all news values considered to be present as secondary values. As components of a measure of utility, length and inclusion of contact information were coded. Because the mailed materials varied greatly in length and format, only a gross estimation of length (short, medium, and long) was attempted, whereas the length of the tipsheet briefs was readily defined. To determine how easily journalists could follow-up on the information presented, contact information was coded according to the presence or absence of information beyond just an address or telephone number (i.e., response cards, email addresses, Web site addresses, toll-free phone numbers, and fax numbers).

Holsti’s formula²⁴ yielded an intercoder reliability of 88.2%. The rate of agreement ranged across categories from 99.6% for manifest content issues to a low of 68.7% for the news values categories. The disagreements over news value coding, however, were mainly over whether a value was primary or secondary and not whether the value was absent or present. When the data are adjusted to check only for presence or absence of a news value, the intercoder reliability for these categories jumps to 85.6%. After all disagreements between coders were reconciled, the data were analyzed using SPSS.

3. Results

Sixty-five mailed public relations packets and 94 online tipsheet briefs generated by SEJ were coded. The data appear to support the first hypothesis. Tipsheet briefs significantly

Table 1
Topics addressed by source

Topic	Government/education (% in category)	Trade/corporate (% in category)	Environmental (% in category)
Population	1.5	2.2	15.4*
Climate	6.2	52.2*	15.4
Pollution	32.3*	13.0	15.4
Habitats	15.4	2.2	19.2*
Reporting	6.2	6.5	3.8
Energy	3.1	4.3	3.8
Health/safety	18.5*	6.5	0.0
Policy	7.7	4.3	11.5
General/mixed	7.7	4.3	15.4
Other	1.5	4.3	0.0

* Percentages within row are significantly different at ($X^2 = 57.7$, 9 d.f., $p < .001$).

more frequently used government or education sources, while public relations materials were significantly more likely to originate from corporate or association sources ($X^2 = 36.7$, 2 d.f., $p = .000$). A closer look at the data, however, reveals that if source categories are not combined, the hypothesis is only partially supported. Government was the source for over half (54.3%) the SEJ tipsheet briefs, but education sources were a distant fourth (6.8%) and were not significantly different in number from mailed sources. Membership or trade organizations were second (19.1%) and environmental groups were third (13.8%), indicating that for environmental issues journalists do not place a premium on information from nonprofit organizations. Of the mailed public relations materials, although membership or trade organizations ranked first, accounting for 36.9% of all pieces, corporations were a distant sixth, accounting for only 7.7%, although use in each case was still significantly higher than for tipsheets. Environmental groups (18.5%) and educational institutions and publishers (12.3% each) were the second and third most frequent contributors. Government sources did not mail any public relations materials.

The data support hypothesis 2. Policy and human health/safety issues accounted for 9.6% and 17.0% of the issues addressed by the SEJ tipsheet briefs respectively, while only 3.1% and 1.5% of the mailed public relations materials dealt with these issues, for a significant difference in the direction expected ($X^2 = 13.2$, 2 d.f., $p = .001$). These issues ranked only second and fourth for the SEJ briefs, however. First was pollution, which was the topic of 34.0% of the briefs; third was land habitats and resources at 10.6%. For the mailed materials, climate dominated (43.1%), followed by population (12.3%), and general environmental issues (10.8%).

The relationship between source and topic was examined post hoc by collapsing sources into three categories: environmental groups and environmentally based corporations, trade organizations and general corporate sources, and government and educational institutions.²⁵ While the source of the information had no significant effect on the topic of the tipsheet briefs it did significantly affect the topic of the public relations mailings. Trade organizations and general corporate mailings targeted the climate a significantly greater percentage of the

Table 2
Tone of materials

Material	Advocacy (% in category)	Backlash (% in category)	Neutral (% in category)
Public relations mailings	16.9	35.4*	47.7
SEJ tipsheet briefs	18.1	2.1	79.8*

* Percentages within column are significantly different ($X^2 = 33.0$, 2 d.f., $p < .001$).

time than either government or environmental organizations, as shown in Table 1. Environmental groups targeted population issues and habitat and resource issues significantly more frequently than did the other two sources. Government and educational institutions were responsible primarily for materials addressing pollution and health/human safety issues (32.3% and 18.5%, respectively).

The source of funding was expressly stated on only one-fourth (24.5%) of the mailed materials, supporting hypothesis 3. Of these, trade organizations accounted for over three-fourths (76.1%) of mentions. Foundations were expressly mentioned on 5.7% of the materials, followed by environmental groups (3.8%) and corporations and publishers (3.1% each). For 3.8% of materials, although a funding source was noted, the affiliation of the source could not be determined (e.g., a listing of individual names only was given). Government, general nonprofits, and educational institutions together accounted for the remaining 4.5%.

Hypothesis 4 was also supported, as shown in Table 2. Mailed public relations materials were significantly more backlash in tone (35.4%) than were the tipsheet briefs (2.1%), and they were significantly less likely to be neutral. All 23 instances of backlash in the mailed materials, however, were attributable to materials from one source. If this one source is discounted, hypothesis 4 is not supported. Tipsheet briefs also presented slightly more advocacy positions (18.1%) than did the mailed materials (16.9%), which is counterintuitive to the objectivity of journalists but provides support to those who claim that environmental journalists are advocates, not objective reporters.

Post hoc analysis revealed that source type significantly affected tone, as shown in Table 3. Government and educational sources were neutral almost three-fourths of the time and had an advocacy tone in almost one-fourth of cases. Trade association and corporate sources had a backlash tone about half the time and were neutral in 43.5% of cases. Surprisingly, environmental sources were neutral in tone in 69.2% of cases and advocacy in tone only 26.9% of the time.

Table 3
Relationship between source type and tone

Source	Advocacy (% in category)	Backlash (% in category)	Neutral (% in category)
Government/education	23.1	3.1	73.8*
Trade/corporate	8.7	47.8*	43.5
Environmental	26.9*	3.8	69.2

* Percentages within column are significantly different ($X^2 = 41.4$, 4 d.f., $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 5 was partially supported by the data—SEJ tipsheet briefs were inherently more news worthy than the mailed public relations materials were, but the mailed materials possessed more overall news utility. An examination of the news values demonstrates that conflict was the top news value for both the mailed materials and the tipsheet briefs, although for the briefs conflict tied with impact for top spot (27.7% each). Impact was the second most common primary news value in the mailed materials (12.3%), followed by timeliness (6.2%) and a tie between prominence and unique/bizarre (1.5% each). Proximity was not a primary news value in any of the mailed pieces, suggesting a lack of localization efforts and a shotgun distribution technique. For the briefs, timeliness was the third most common primary news value (14.9%), followed by proximity (5.3%), prominence (3.2%), and unique/bizarre (1.1%).

Because all secondary news values present were coded, these categories total more than 100. For the internal materials, conflict was a secondary value 26.6% of the time versus 9.2% for external materials. Conflict was not present 53.8% of the time in the mailed pieces and 45.7% of the time for tipsheet briefs. Impact was one of the secondary values for 40.4% of briefs and 32.3% of the mailings. Impact was not present in 55.4% of the mailings and 31.9% of the briefs. Timeliness, although seldom a primary news value, was used significantly more often as a secondary value for tipsheet briefs (44.7%) than for the mailed materials (26.2%; see Table 4). Timeliness was not a value at all for 67.7% of the mailings. Uniqueness and prominence as secondary values did not differ between the mailings and the briefs. Although the mailings made virtually no attempt to localize their information, proximity was an important secondary news value for the tipsheet briefs. A total of 44.7% of the briefs had proximity as a secondary value while only 4.6% of the mailings contained a local angle.

To measure overall news worthiness, all news value scores were summed for each subsidy. If at least five of the six news values coded received a 3, which is no news value (range = 17 to 18), a weak news value was assigned. Moderate values were those materials in which at least two of the categories received a primary or secondary news value score (range = 14 to 16). Strong news value scores were given if at least three categories received a primary or secondary news value score (range = 12 to 13). As shown in Table 5, the tipsheet briefs had a significantly greater percentage in the strong news value category, while the mailings from public relations practitioners had significantly more materials score in the low category, supporting the first contention of Hypothesis 4.

To assess the overall utility of the two forms of information subsidies to journalists, an index was constructed combining news value, length, and contact sources. While journalists have long contended that shorter is better,²⁶ over 66% of the mailed pieces were classified as long, that is equal to or greater than six pages total length. A total of 18.5% were classified as short—less than or equal to two pages total—while the remaining 15.4% fell into the medium range. Few of the tipsheet briefs (14.9%) ranked as short (less than or equal to one inch). The majority were almost evenly split between medium (40.4%; greater than one inch and less than or equal to two inches) and long (44.7%; greater than two inches in length).

Contact information allows journalists to follow up on a story and to exercise autonomy over its development, increasing the chance the information subsidy will be used.²⁷ No

Table 4
News values present

News value rating	Public relations mailings (% in category)	SEJ tipsheet briefs (% in category)	Chi square value
Conflict			7.51
Primary	36.9	27.7	
Secondary	9.2	26.6*	
Not present	53.8	45.7	
Impact			10.0
Primary	12.3	27.7*	
Secondary	32.3	40.4	
Not present	55.4*	31.9	
Timeliness			11.7
Primary	6.2	14.9	
Secondary	26.2	44.7*	
Not present	67.7*	40.4	
Proximity			36.8
Primary	0.0	5.3	
Secondary	4.6	44.7*	
Not present	95.4*	50.0	
Prominence			3.83
Primary	1.5	3.2	
Secondary	29.2	42.6	
Not present	69.2	54.3	
Unique			3.54
Primary	1.5	1.1	
Secondary	1.5	8.5	
Not present	96.9	90.4	

* Percentages within row are significantly different (2 d.f., $p = .023$ for conflict, $.007$ for impact, $.003$ for timeliness, and $< .001$ for proximity).

contact information was provided on one mailed piece and one tipsheet brief. Besides addresses and telephone numbers, Web addresses were the most frequently used form of contact on the remaining materials (86.2% of mailed materials and 73.4% of tipsheet briefs). Email was the second most commonly supplied form of additional contact, although only 18.1% of briefs supplied email addresses or links compared to 84.6% of mailed materials. Fax numbers were included on 24.5% of mailed materials but did not appear in any of the briefs. Just over one-fourth (26.1%) of the mailed materials included response cards.

Table 5
Comparative index of news values

Material	News value (% in category)		
	Weak	Moderate	Strong
Public relations mailings	40.0*	53.8	6.2
SEJ tipsheet briefs	12.8	46.8	40.4*

* Percentages within column are significantly different ($X^2 = 29.4$, 2 d.f., $p < .001$).

Table 6
Comparative utility scores

Utility (points)	Public relations mailings (percent)	SEJ tipsheet briefs (percent)
1 (low)	6.2	5.3
2	8.2	37.2*
3	44.6*	36.2
4	32.3*	20.0
5	7.7	1.1
6 (high)	1.5	0.0

* Percentages within row are significantly different ($X^2 = 22.2$, 5 d.f., $p < .001$).

Toll-free numbers were included in 10.8% of the mailed materials but did not appear in any of the briefs.

To create the overall utility index, one point each was given for a length of short or moderate, if a contact was listed, and for providing an email address, Web address, fax number, or toll-free phone number. News value was calculated by summing the six news categories, with two points given for a news value total ranging from 12 to 13, one point for 14 to 16, and no points for 17 to 18 (a lower total indicated a stronger news value). The total potential range for utility of item was 0 to 7; the actual range was 1 to 6.

Significant differences existed in the utility of the mailed pieces and tipsheet briefs, as shown in Table 6. The second part of Hypothesis 5 was not supported: the mailings rated higher than did the briefs. The percentage of briefs receiving a low utility score was 78.7, while the percentage of mailings from practitioners in that same range was 59.0. Similarly, mailings had 41.5% in the high-utility range, and briefs had only 21.3%. Practitioner mailings tended to rate more highly because they included several modes of contact while most tipsheet briefs included only a phone number and e-mail address or Web site. News values tended to be greater for briefs and length was shorter. For both, however, the majority of scores were in the midrange.

4. Discussion

Before discussing the results of this study, it is necessary to note limitations of the sample. Not included were materials obtained through personal relationships with sources, news conferences, materials mailed based on customized media lists, and wire copy, such as PR Newswire or Greenwire. SEJ's tipsheet briefs, however, represent an amalgamation of these sources, including personal contacts, advisories of government news conferences, and wire copy, in a readily available form for study. Additionally, the advantage to using materials from SEJ's mailing list and the SEJ tipsheets is that SEJ members necessarily receive these materials, whereas not all media outlets subscribe to specific wire services, have the means to send their reporters to cover news conferences, or have a listing for an environmental beat

in media directories. Thus the materials used represent one part of the stream of environmental information subsidies, but it is a highly targeted part of that stream with a guaranteed reception.

While the hypotheses were all or partially supported, a closer look at the data are revealing. The major source of public relations materials (35%) was the Western Fuels Association, a coalition of mainly coal companies, who provided journalists with a steady stream of information presenting a backlash viewpoint on climate issues. This membership/trade association stands to benefit most from adoption of policy decisions based on such a philosophy, and this one case supports Stauber and Rampton's charges in *Toxic Sludge*—but it is the only case that did. This study confirms the work of Ryan and Martinson, who found that a few 'bad apple' experiences appear responsible for poor perceptions of the public relations profession as a whole.²⁸

That government sources were the most prevalent overall, despite not being present in the public relations materials, demonstrates their overwhelming dominance in the journalistic information subsidies. The recurrence of the same names of PIOs and agencies (e.g., Robin Woods at EPA) suggests a close relationship exists between these sources and the reporters. The relatively high percentage of materials originating from membership or trade groups, however, may signal that for environmental issues special interests are better able to influence the media agenda than for many other issues. Because the tipsheets provided approximately four sources for each story, however, practitioners providing subsidies may be more influential at introducing an item to the agenda than in framing its subsequent discussion. Use of two-sided arguments and inoculation theory may help influence the subsequent framing.

Noticeably lacking from the tipsheet briefs were corporations. While corporations were not well represented in the mailed materials, indicative perhaps of their use of more sophisticated media relations techniques, their lack of representation in the tipsheet briefs demonstrates that they are still not effectively reaching journalists. The green image that so many corporations are working to establish is not finding its way onto the media agenda.

The topic and focus of the materials varied significantly between the public relations and journalistic information subsidies, with the tipsheet briefs being more evenly distributed across subjects. The overwhelming emphasis of the public relations materials was on climate and population issues, spurred by the Western Fuels Association information subsidies on the issue of global warming and conflict within the Sierra Club on immigration. But as demonstrated in recent polls, these issues may lack personal salience with the public.²⁹ Conversely, the internal materials emphasized human health/safety issues, which have a more demonstrable impact on readers.³⁰ Internal materials also stressed policy issues, indicative of their dependence on government PIOs as sources.

The focus of the public relations materials was often vague and demonstrated little attempt to actively build the media agenda. The emphasis in the tipsheets was on providing journalists with background on an issue and pointing them to data sources, many of them Web sites, to assist in computer-aided reporting efforts. These results suggest it may be more effective and cost efficient for corporations, for example, to make environmental audit data available in rough form on their Web site and point journalists to it rather than

publishing a slick 50-page environmental report. These findings parallel those of broadcast subsidies, in which journalists are more likely to use B-roll footage than they are a fully produced VNR.³¹

Although a major criticism of environmental reporting is that it fails to note the funding source for research data, the tipsheet briefs never made explicit note of funding sources, whereas almost one-fourth of all public relations materials did. Some of these efforts at self-disclosure, however, may not be as altruistic as they seem. While the first few issues of the World Climate Report were clearly marked as funded by the Western Fuels Association, this statement was changed in later issues to funding by the Green Earth Society, Inc.—a front organization for the same coal companies but with a greener sounding name.

As expected, public relations materials were significantly less likely to be neutral in tone than were the SEJ briefs, but the briefs were slightly more likely to adopt an advocacy tone, despite condemnation for such a stance within the environmental reporting community.³² Little evidence of backlash was present in the tipsheets, and all instances of backlash in the mailed materials were from the same source. Because more than 35% of the mailed pieces exhibited a backlash tone, however, a sleeper effect could take place, with journalists believing a large number of public relations materials are backlash in tone. The role of journalists' perceptions needs further study. Environmental groups had almost the same proportion of neutral to advocacy pieces as did government sources, which suggests they may be trying to appear neutral in an age of backlash. Previous research, however, demonstrates that neutral releases result in neutral coverage and point-of-view pieces often result in concurrent coverage;³³ thus environmental groups may not be making the best use of agenda-building opportunities.

Many significant differences appeared in news values employed. Public relations sources failed to address how their materials could be applied locally. Lack of localization has long been a complaint of editors about public relations information subsidies,³⁴ and the present study suggests that progress still needs to be made in this area. Writers of the briefs, however, made a conscious effort to provide state and local angles for almost all tips, often using it as a secondary value for story ideas. Both internal and external agenda builders believed journalists wanted material high in conflict or impact or both. The issues addressed by the materials often revolved around popular issues and concerns, but the prominence of the issue or person was not emphasized. Similarly, timeliness was not emphasized even though many of the materials involved issues currently in front of the public.

Although contact information was usually supplied in more than one format, Web and email addresses were the most common addition to the usual street addresses and phone numbers. The predominance of Web addresses suggests contacts are becoming less personal and more mediated, in opposition to studies that have demonstrated that more credible media relations result from personal contact.³⁵ The trends toward making data available for computer-assisted reporting and for referring journalists to Web sites for further information suggest the increasing importance of public relations involvement in Web site design and may change the focus of media relations practitioners.

5. Conclusion

Within the distribution channels examined here, backlash materials are reaching journalists more frequently than are materials from environmental groups, demonstrating that backlash groups are more effectively forwarding their agenda to journalists. Evidence suggests, however, that environmentalists may not need to push their agenda because environmental journalists are already on their side. An advocacy tone was detected substantially more frequently than a backlash tone in the SEJ-produced tipsheet briefs.

While controversy is not often a news value courted by public relations practitioners for their clients, this study suggests that environmental agenda-building efforts will be more effective if conflict can be wisely managed through efforts such as publication of research data on Web sites made readily available to journalists and with an accessible local angle. This study refutes the conclusion reached in *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You*—that public relations efforts are behind only the environmental backlash movement. What it does demonstrate is that public relations work for backlash causes has done a more effective job of tying in to journalists' preferred news values and needs than have public relations efforts for environmental advocacy groups. Given the grassroots support and ability of the backlash movement to stop environmental legislation,³⁶ environmental groups appear to be lagging behind in the agenda-building race.

Further quantitative and qualitative study is needed of other agenda-building efforts, such as PR Newswire, news conferences, and personal contacts, to determine if these same trends are evident in other communication channels. This study also examines only the agenda-building end of the process of news coverage of the environment. Content analyses of subsequent media coverage are necessary to determine the efficacy of these agenda-building efforts.

Appendix A. Coding categories and combined frequencies

Category	Percentage
Source	
corporate—not environment	2.5
corporate, environment focus	0.6
government	32.1
environmental group	15.7
foundation	2.5
general nonprofit	3.1
membership or trade organization	26.4
educational institution	8.8
publisher/media outlet	6.3
unknown	1.9

Length

Mailed materials

short (equal to or <2 pages total)	18.5
medium (>2 pages, <6 pages total)	15.4
long (equal to or >6 pages total)	66.2

Tip sheets

short (equal to or <1 inch)	14.4
medium (>1 inch, < or equal to 2 inches)	40.4
long (> than 2 inches)	44.7

Topic

population	5.0
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Category

Percentage

climate	21.4
pesticides/herbicides/endocrine disruptors/toxins	5.7
air pollution/quality	2.5
water pollution/quality	8.8
land habitats/resources	6.9
water habitats/resources	4.4
biological/chemical weapons	0.6
environmental reporting/science writing	5.7
environmental audit	1.3
environmental sustainability/energy	4.4
food/health/human safety	10.7
general, mixed topics	9.4
ecological psychology	0.6
solid waste, hazardous and otherwise	5.7
policy	6.9

News values

Timeliness

yes, primary	11.3
yes, secondary	37.1
no	51.6

Impact

yes, primary	21.4
yes, secondary	37.1
no	41.5

Prominence	
yes, primary	2.5
yes, secondary	37.1
no	60.4
Proximity	
yes, primary	3.1
yes, secondary	28.3
no	68.6
Conflict	
yes, primary	31.4
yes, secondary	19.5
no	49.1
Unique/bizarre	
yes, primary	1.3
yes, secondary	5.7
no	93.1
Category	Percentage
Tone	
advocacy	17.6
backlash	15.7
neutral	66.7
Contact info	
yes	98.7
no	1.3
Response card or form	
yes	10.7
no	89.3
email address	
yes	45.3
no	54.7
web site	
yes	78.6
no	21.4
800 # or 888 #	
yes	4.4
no	95.6
fax #	
yes	20.8
no	79.2
Funding source explicitly noted	
yes	24.5
no	75.5

Type of funding source (first listed)	
corporate	3.1
government	1.9
environmental group	3.8
foundation	5.7
general nonprofit	1.3
think tank	0.0
educational institution	1.3
publisher	3.1
trade organization	76.1
membership organization	0.0
unknown/not marked/individuals listed	3.8

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