


RESEARCH

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## AGAINST THE CURRENT. INDEPENDENT ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM ON DIGITAL MEDIA IN MEXICO

### A CONTRACORRIENTE. LOS MEDIOS DIGITALES INDEPENDIENTES DE PERIODISMO AMBIENTAL EN MÉXICO

 **Raquel Aparicio Cid**<sup>1</sup>. Veracruzana University. Mexico.  
[raparicio@uv.mx](mailto:raparicio@uv.mx)

#### ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of an exploratory and descriptive study made to know the reality of environmental journalism in Mexico, through specialized digital media, and of identifying the most solid initiatives in this field. It was found that, of the spectrum of digital portals that divulge environmental information, there are three who produce their own content through a professional practice with a complex and contextualized perspective, close to the cultural and ecosystemic identity of their respective regions of operations. In order to achieve a qualitative comprehension of these journalistic endeavors, interviews were made with the editors of three of them, aiming to know their views on socio-environmental issues in the country, the role of environmental journalism in the visibility of environmental topics in the social sphere, and the challenges and possibilities of consolidation of this profession. The editors of these sites are veteran journalists who seek to offer contents that are useful for comprehension, reflection, and decision-making by audiences on local issues. It is concluded that, against the disinterest of other actors to generate useful environmental information for social and political decision-making, it is necessary to strengthen this kind of initiatives, for they constitute a referent to the kind of environmental journalism that is required by the conditions of the country and their replication is desirable to favor social action in environmental issues on a local scale.

**KEYWORDS:** local journalism – transversality – complexity – socio-environmental issues – cultural identity – investigative journalism – environmental communication.

#### RESUMEN

En este artículo se presentan los resultados de un estudio exploratorio y descriptivo realizado con el objetivo de conocer la situación del periodismo ambiental que se

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<sup>1</sup>**Raquel Aparicio Cid:** Postgraduate professor at the Education Research Institute of the Veracruzana University. Doctor in Educational Research by the Veracruzana University.  
[raparicio@uv.mx](mailto:raparicio@uv.mx)

desarrolla en México a través de medios digitales independientes especializados, y de identificar las iniciativas más sólidas en este rubro. Se encontró que, del universo de medios digitales que difunden información ambiental, existen tres que generan sus propios contenidos mediante una práctica profesional con perspectiva de complejidad, contextualizada, próxima a la identidad cultural y ecosistémica de las regiones en las que operan. Para lograr una comprensión cualitativa de estas iniciativas periodísticas, se hicieron entrevistas a los directores de tres de ellos, con el fin de conocer su perspectiva sobre las problemáticas socioambientales del país, el papel del periodismo ambiental en la visibilización de los temas ambientales en el ámbito social, así como los desafíos y las posibilidades de consolidación de este quehacer. Los directores de estos sitios son periodistas de vasta experiencia que procuran ofrecer contenidos útiles para la comprensión, la reflexión y la toma de decisiones por parte de las audiencias acerca de problemas locales. Se concluye que, frente al desinterés de otros actores por generar información ambiental útil para la toma de decisiones a escala social y política, es necesario fortalecer este tipo de iniciativas, pues constituyen un referente del tipo de periodismo ambiental requerido para las condiciones del país y su replicación es deseable para favorecer la acción social en los asuntos ambientales a nivel local.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** periodismo local – transversalidad – complejidad – problemas socioambientales – identidad cultural– periodismo de investigación – comunicación ambiental.

## **EM CONTRAFLUXO. A MÍDIA DIGITAL INDEPENDENTE DO JORNALISMO AMBIENTAL NO MÉXICO**

### **RESUMO**

Neste artigo se apresentam os resultados de um estudo exploratório e descritivo feito com o objetivo de conhecer a situação do jornalismo ambiental que se desenvolve no México através de mídias digitais independentes especializadas, e de identificar as iniciativas mais sólidas nesta área. Foi descoberto que, do universo de mídias digitais que disseminam a informação ambiental, existem três que geram seus próprios conteúdos mediante uma prática profissional com perspectiva de complexidade, contextualizada, próxima a identidade cultural e ecosistémica das regiões nas que operam. Para alcançar uma compreensão qualitativa destas iniciativas jornalísticas, se fizeram questionários aos diretores de três jornais, com a finalidade de conhecer sua perspectiva sobre as problemáticas socioambientais do país, o papel do jornalismo ambiental na visibilidade dos tópicos ambientais no âmbito social, assim como os desafios e as possibilidades de consolidação deste trabalho. Os diretores destes lugares são jornalistas de vasta experiência que procuram, oferecer conteúdos úteis para a compreensão, reflexão e a tomada de decisões por parte das audiências sobre os problemas locais. Se conclui que, devido ao desinteresse de outros atores por gerar informação ambiental útil para a tomada de decisões a escala social e política, é preciso fortalecer este tipo de iniciativas, pois constitui uma referência do tipo de jornalismo ambiental requerido para as condições do país e sua replicação é desejável para favorecer a ação social nos quesitos ambientais a nível local.

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** Jornalismo local – Transversalidade – Complexidade – Problemas socioambientais– Identidade cultural– Jornalismo investigativo – Comunicação

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Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

## 1. INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION AND JOURNALISM

The civilizational model has caused severe levels of environmental deterioration and loss of biodiversity in the world, among other widely documented global phenomena.<sup>2</sup> The non-viability of this model, both socially and environmentally, invokes the need to establish new ways of life based on sustainability and self-containment, through a profound transformation of perspectives and values towards the natural world, towards the own species, and the relationship between the two (Meisner, 2015).

In this transformation, the functions of communication in the social processes of meaning creation are vital, since through it the way of understanding and valuing the world is molded, as well as the role of human beings in it (Meisner, 2015). Communication can influence the construction of a culture different from the current one regarding its relationship with nature (Castro, Reyes, and Larrosa, 2012).

I refer in particular to the possibilities that environmental communication offers for this transformation in Mexico, a nation of multiple and complex socio-environmental realities, which demand a diversity of alternatives from the social sphere to establish an equitable and sustainable social order. Unlike its evolution in other countries, environmental communication here is an emerging field that arises from the experience and little-recognized daily practice of agricultural and forestry technicians, farmers, experts in the natural sciences, social and environmental organizations, activists, communicators, and journalists specialized in environmental matters.

Within the multi-origin context of environmental communication, environmental journalism is a field little studied, which is built from professional practice and faces important challenges, which is why it is relevant to make a critical review of its situation and its prospects for consolidation.

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<sup>2</sup> Read the report published in 2019 by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (at: <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>), or the three special reports generated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) between 2018 and 2019: *Global Warming of 1.5°C* (SR15), *Climate Change and Land* (SRCCL), *The Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* (SROCC) (at <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/>).

## 1.1. Context of environmental journalism in Mexico

The concept of environmental journalism can be elaborated from its characteristics: without being scientific journalism, it uses theoretical elements from various scientific disciplines to explain natural phenomena; it involves philosophical, ethical, and cultural aspects in its understanding of problems; it is preventive since it foresees negative events from present conflictive reality. It is considered "investment journalism", as it requires long periods of research, the work of specialized journalists and experts, as well as financial resources; it demands the consultation of various sources, with sometimes conflicting perspectives, on the same issue; for its purposes, it promotes social change (González, 2007).

The emergence of environmental journalism was largely due to the growing consequences of environmental damage for human populations. Despite being a marginalized specialty in the spectrum of public communication, environmental journalism is recognized as an essential professional task (Picó and Pellisser, 2010). On the other hand, if journalism is in itself considered a profession of a critical nature to the political and social order, environmental journalism is particularly perceptive towards the dysfunctionalities of the prevailing economic development model; However, its marginality makes it difficult to insert environmental issues into the public agenda (Castro, Reyes, and Larrosa, 2012), as well as to awaken the attention of audiences to them.<sup>3</sup>

The situation described is fundamentally caused by the fact that private companies (including communication companies), multilateral organizations, national governments, and even non-governmental organizations are ideologically attached to the global development scheme, for which they assume a weak notion of sustainability, such as that which supports the concept of *sustainable development*.<sup>4</sup> In such a way, the instrumentalization of life and nature has become normalized in the social imaginary – affirm Castro, Reyes, and Larrosa (2012) -, that today it is "difficult to find speeches in the media that make a frontal criticism of a civilizing project that has fostered a split between society and nature, and is leading to an ecological crisis of uncertain magnitudes" (p. 58). On the contrary, what is required is a communicative practice that integrates an explanatory critique of the causes of social and environmental problems generated by the current development model, according to the cited authors.

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<sup>3</sup> Alcoceba (2004) attributes the lack of interest of people towards environmental issues to the lack of commitment of news companies to offer a sufficient and adequate supply of content on the subject.

<sup>4</sup> Gudynas (2010) analyzes the trends of sustainable development and distinguishes at least three "degrees" or levels of it: weak, strong, and super strong. The first, he explains, maintains the validity of the ideology of progress, submits to the goals of economic growth, gives economic value to Nature, and specifies certain manageable ecological limits. This type of sustainable development considers conservation as a necessity for economic growth since it regards nature as a "resource" and as "capital" for human well-being.

Despite the criticism it constantly receives, the work of the news media has an important effect on societies, since, by offering information about daily events, they help people to understand the keys to their environment (Picó, 2017 ) and to create an informed opinion that generates reflections on the state of things, which can be considered in itself as a formative element (Castro, Reyes, and Larrosa, 2012). However, it is not a function of the media to educate society on any subject; at this point "it would be necessary to differentiate between the process of creating an opinion on any environmental issue and the educational process" (Picó, 2017, p. 391-392). This aspect must be discussed with other national environmental actors, including government entities, non-governmental organizations, activists, and environmental educators, who frequently demand an educational effect on society from the media.

## 1.2. From *traditional* media to digital media

The field of communication research has been interested in the performance of traditional news media in handling environmental issues, but it has not done the same with independent initiatives of environmental journalism in autonomous digital media (that is, independent of governmental or private informational companies, governmental entities, and non-governmental organizations), which provide specialized information to influence the public agenda to achieve attention and solution to national socio-environmental problems.

Salaverría (2015) questions the tendency to focus digital journalism studies on the digital versions of print newspapers and suggests broadening the spectrum of research on this type of media because, "if the journalistic industry multiplies and consolidates native digital media, it seems necessary to pay interest to research on those media" (p. 224). On the other hand, this type of research requires more analytical studies than the eminently descriptive ones (idem).

Factors of various kinds favor the existence of these digital media (native) of environmental journalism. One of them is what could be considered the scant interest on the part of the 'traditional' news companies to hold an exclusive section or team on environmental issues.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, the permanence in the traditional media of the few journalists who have specialized in environmental matters is quite vulnerable (Castillo, 2019; Picó and Pellisser, 2010) compared to those who attend other "sources" or news topics. The result is that, in these media, environmental information remains at a *latent* level, since it cannot disappear, but neither can it reach permanent important spaces within the informational content (idem), except in cases where the environment is catastrophic or spectacular (Alcoceba, 2004; Cimadevilla, 2005).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This is due, among other reasons that have been exposed, to the fact that the environmental story is complex, diverse, and specific, characteristics that make it difficult to understand among mass audiences (Picó, 2014), besides that it is not attractive from an advertising perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Of the traditional Mexican media with national coverage that have electronic sites, only the Televisa website has a fixed segment on "Climate and natural phenomena". Canal Once of the National Polytechnic Institute temporarily develops a series of shows in collaboration with the National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity, entitled "Nature", but it is not a permanent show. The Excelsior newspaper's website has a commercial supplement entitled "Atmosphere", which

In general, the approach to environmental information in traditional media (as in the majority economic, political, and social sectors) is predominantly anthropocentric; In other words, catastrophes or environmental problems tend to be assessed according to the effects on human populations, and prejudices in ecosystems or biodiversity are seldom observed as relevant in themselves. The informative treatment focuses on the economic effects caused by environmental degradation in productive activities and the state of "natural resources", under a pragmatic approach that limits the possibilities of people to participate in processes of change of the prevailing lifestyles (Castro, Reyes, and Larrosa, 2012). Besides, coverage of the consequences is privileged; few spaces are given to research the causes and structure a holistic approach to the complex relationships of the social with the environment.

Behind these prevailing informational approaches, Cimadevilla (2005) discovers a "naturo-causal" reasoning, due to which the *ordinary* journalistic treatment of information on environmental matters "reinforces a certain deterministic conception that 'what nature produces' is independent to society and the latter is free from its forces, movements, and contingencies" (p. 117). This generates in the subjects an idea of disconnection regarding the interactions or effects of human activities on the environment, as well as the responses of nature to anthropic phenomena. The foregoing is a reflection of the majority of social perceptions, as indicated.

Without such roots, independent environmental journalism can look at environmental issues in other ways, broad in perspective and research. The internet offers practically unlimited spaces for this.<sup>7</sup> In this way, the supply, quality, and selection of socio-environmental issues through the internet become a priority that is feasible to carry out, which helps to keep alive "the aspiration to integrate the environment in day-to-day life, normally, without the need for natural catastrophes or ecological spectacles" (Picó and Pellisser, 2010: 53). Alcoceba (2004) adds to the advantages of the internet the opportunity to expand the scope of environmental information, by allowing the prevalence of local perspectives towards the global, contrary to what generally occurs with planetary environmental phenomena, such as global warming and the loss of biodiversity.

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promotes "green" businesses. Four other traditional media of national coverage have science and technology sections, which is what is considered closest to environmental information. The magazine Proceso published in April 2020 a special report on the Mayan train on a site created for it (<https://trenmaya.proceso.com.mx/>), which contains an extraordinary research work on various areas that converge in the problem. In January 2020, Nexos magazine opened a blog entitled "Environmental Crisis", which includes contributions from experts and people interested in the subject to publish small essays or opinions on the various environmental problems of the country (<https://medioambiente.nexos.com.mx/>). Outside of these initiatives, no other segment, section, or show specialized in environmental issues was found in the digital versions of traditional journalistic media.

<sup>7</sup> Peña-López and Padró-Solanet (2017) observe two great advantages in internet access. On the one hand, they mention, the web tools "have made citizens realize, through the back door, the great changes that affect our daily lives" (p. 398). On the other hand, in internet scenarios, without intermediaries, communication channels also promote socialization and conversation on topics of social interest, beyond the political agendas and predominant discourses.

Given these reasons, within the spectrum of specialties that environmental communication encompasses, this article focuses on the digital media of environmental journalism, considering them a space in which environmental communication has the possibility of self-construction and consolidation.

## **2. OBJECTIVE**

The objective of the research is to characterize the situation of independent digital media of environmental journalism in Mexico based on an exploratory and descriptive study of these media, focused on the ethical and journalistic principles that they uphold, in the perspective with which they address socio-environmental issues, as well as the challenges for the construction of environmental journalism demanded by the national problem.

The research questions are: What are the objectives of the independent digital media of environmental journalism in Mexico? In what context does this type of media emerge? What challenges does environmental journalism face to achieve its consolidation?

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Methodological strategy**

The methodological route for the preparation and analysis of data is described below.

#### *3.1.1. Selection of cases*

To define the exploration universe, a first search was made in January 2020 through electronic search engines, using keywords such as "environmental information", "environmental journalism", "environmental news", "Mexico", "environmental communication", which yielded a significant number of sites related to government entities, non-governmental organizations, and some "traditional" media that address this type of content. Journalists, non-governmental organizations, and environmental activists were also consulted directly on the existence of this type of electronic portals.

Based on the first results obtained, the characteristics of the type of media that interest for the research were defined, to delimit the sample: They are national electronic sites; They specialize in the dissemination of information on environmental issues (they are discarded by the sites of companies or consultancies that offer content production or dissemination services); they are updated regularly; they use journalistic genres (essays, reports, news, chronicles) supported by photographs and multimedia resources; They belong to independent groups made up of communicators, experts on natural sciences, or environmentalists.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> They are independent of "traditional" media, as well as non-governmental environmental organizations (WWF, Pronatura, Ceiba, CCMSS, CEMDA, Naturalia, FMCN, etc.), certifiers (FSC, Rainforest Alliance),

By focusing the search on the established criteria, a list was left with eight portals that covered most of these characteristics. In a new review, it was found that one of these sites, due to its profile, corresponded to the portal of an organization of environmental journalists ([www.rempa.com.mx](http://www.rempa.com.mx)), and another had disappeared from the internet, (<http://www.planetaazul.com.mx/site/>) for which the universe focused on six digital media of environmental information/journalism (Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Digital media of environmental information and journalism existing in the country.*

Media	Mexico ambiental	Ecohistorias	Meloncoyote	Tierra baldía	Verde bandera	Son Playas
URL	<a href="http://www.mexicoambiental.org">www.mexicoambiental.org</a>	<a href="http://ecohistorias.com.mx/category/mexico/">http://ecohistorias.com.mx/category/mexico/</a>	<a href="http://www.meloncoyote.org/">http://www.meloncoyote.org/</a>	<a href="http://www.tierrabaldia.com.mx">www.tierrabaldia.com.mx</a>	<a href="https://verdebandera.mx/">https://verdebandera.mx/</a>	<a href="https://sonplayas.com">https://sonplayas.com</a>
Headquarters	Michoacan	Mexico City	Gulf of California region	Puebla	Jalisco	Sinaloa

**Source:** Self-made.

By including quality and current characteristics of the content and the exercise of a journalistic practice specialized in socio-environmental issues, it was found that two of these media (México ambiental and Ecohistorias) offer content mainly prepared from official documents, press releases, news from other news agencies and sites, unlike the other four portals, which produce their own content as a result of journalistic practice. For this reason, these two portals were classified as sites for the dissemination of *environmental information*.

Among the four digital media that carry out environmental journalism, it was observed that the Meloncoyote<sup>9</sup> website –a regional journalism medium in the Gulf of California that gathers content of good journalistic quality–, has the sole function of serving as a repository for an annual number of environmental news prepared in pdf format. Lacking some of the characteristics defined for the selection of the sample, such as the design and functionality of the site, as well as the long periods for updating the information, Meloncoyote was discarded as part of the sample. The study focused

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governmental institutions (Semarnat, Conabio, IMTA, Conanp, INECC, etc.), public or private companies (HSBC Environmental Fund, Reforestamos México -of Bimbo-, Ford Foundation, Coca-Cola, among others), higher education institutions, churches, political parties, international organizations (UNEP, IPCC, UN Environment, IUCN), as well as communication companies or consultancies (Conecto <https://www.conecto.mx/en/>; Ecoosfera <https://ecoosfera.com>).

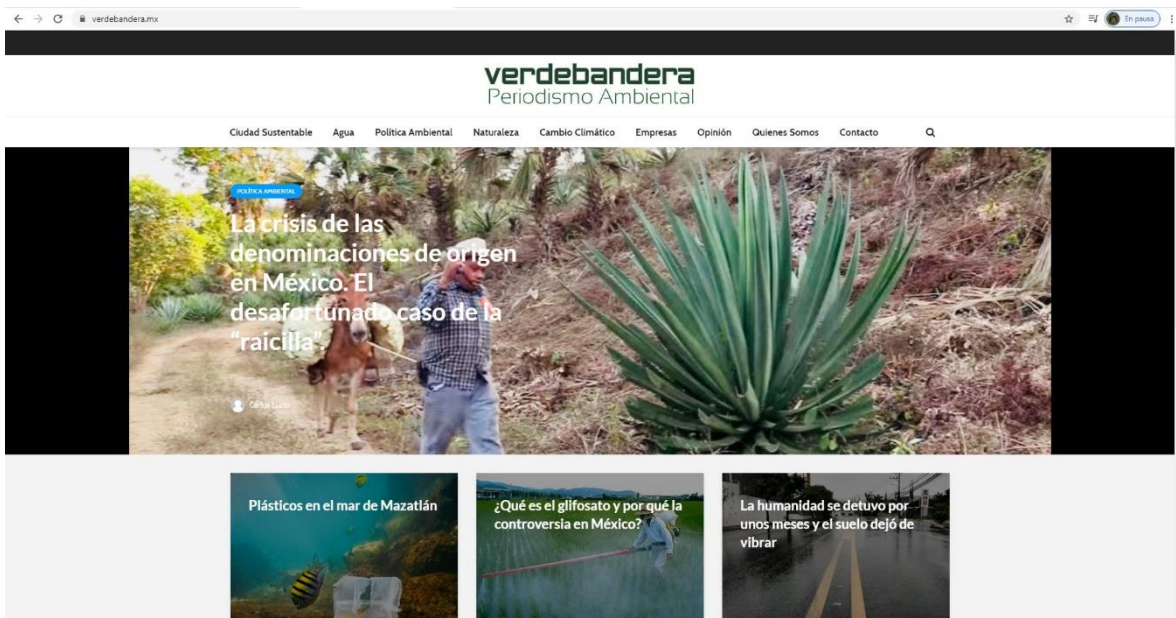
<sup>9</sup> Meloncoyote is a product of the Journalism to Raise Ecological Awareness (PECE for its acronym in Spanish) project, supported by the McArthur Foundation. The website was created in 2009, in a fixed magazine format. In April of that year it published a first issue in Spanish; in 2010, three issues in Spanish and English; and two in 2011. Between 2012 and 2017 it published a single annual issue. It stopped publishing in 2018 and 2019, and in 2020, to date, it appears with a single issue.



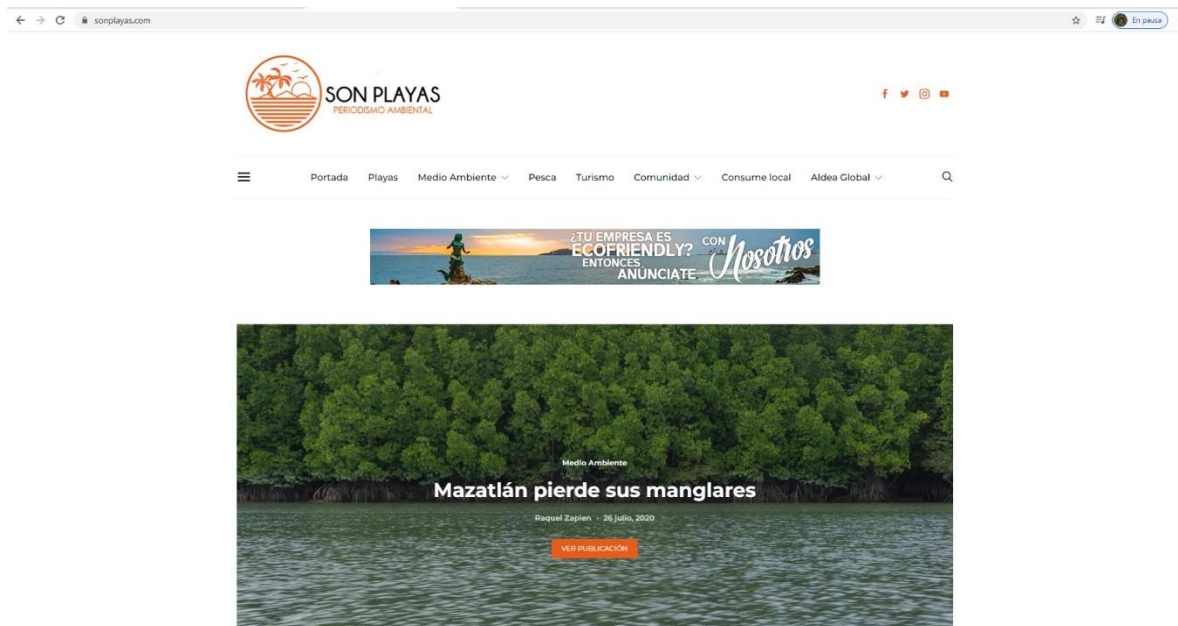
on three digital media with optimal characteristics of content quality, journalistic practice, and access and functionality of the site, which identify them as Mexican independent digital media of environmental journalism: Tierra Baldia, Verde Bandera, and Son Playas (Annex 1).



**Image 1.** Home page of Tierra baldía.  
Source: <http://tierrabaldia.com.mx/>



**Image 2.** Home page of Verde bandera.  
Source: <https://verdebandera.mx/>



**Image 3.** Home page of Son playas.

Source: <https://sonplayas.com/>

### 3.1.2. Data processing and analysis

The collection of information on the eight digital media identified in the first stage was based on the method for media observation proposed by Paláu and Larrosa-Fuentes (2014). For each of the media, a file was drawn up to record general data, which included: name of the media, URL, objective/mission, director, team of collaborators, start date, periodicity, sections, predominant topics, graphic and multimedia elements it uses, journalistic genres, interactivity, financing, visible statistics, screenshots, among other data. The purpose of this registry was to identify the current environmental information sites to have an overview of current digital media. Based on the records of each medium, a general data concentration matrix of the identified media and a general description that includes the three selected media was prepared.

The analysis and interpretation of data from the digital media identified in the first phase was based on the method of Paláu and Larrosa-Fuentes (2014), and took references from the website analysis scheme of Covi, Aguirre, Apodaca, and Camacho (2002), giving greater relevance to the quality and timeliness of the contents, as well as to significant use of journalistic resources, to determine which ones develop a professional practice of environmental journalism feasible to consolidate, or already consolidated, as indicated.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the directors of Tierra baldia, María del Carmen Tajonar Méndez; from Verde Bandera, Sergio Hernández Márquez, and from Son Playas, Raquel Zapien Osuna, based on an interview guide with eight questions to complete information related to the media and the context in which they arose, as well as to know the perspective of these

communicators around the journalistic proposal that each one directs, and the future of environmental journalism in general. Said interviews were transcribed to recover the most relevant contents to the objective of this work and proceed with the corresponding analysis of them through the meaning condensation procedure (Kvale, 2014).<sup>10</sup> Based on an interpretative synthesis that would allow obtaining elements to answer the research questions, the categorical axes of the study are broken down: the situation of the native digital media of environmental journalism, the ethical and professional principles of journalistic practice, as well as the challenges for the consolidation of environmental journalism.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Results

The presentation of these results is done through a contrasting of the responses of the interviewees that allows finding the points of consensus and dissent about the analyzed aspects of this professional field under construction, which currently has only three independent digital media of environmental journalism.<sup>11</sup> The statements presented here have been verbally expressed by Tajonar Méndez, Hernández Márquez, and Zapien Osuna during the interviews carried out by the researcher. Textual citations are referenced only with the issuer's surnames.

The directors of the studied sites coincide in having a deep personal interest in environmental issues and little possibility of exercising it in traditional media; They are in an age range that goes from 45 to 50 years old, they have an experience of at least two decades in the practice of journalism in their respective entities, and their current interest is to consolidate a professional project that allows them to develop their professional activity in the most satisfactory way possible, represented by their respective sites. Two of them studied at public state universities and one at a private university. Two have degrees in communication and one has a degree in political studies.

#### 4.1.1. *Situation of environmental journalism*

The interviewees agree that, as a professional practice, environmental journalism began to be made visible in Mexico around the 2000s, although since the 1990s some initiatives were promoted to cover environmental issues by traditional news companies. To date, although progress has been observed in terms of expanding the practice of environmental journalism among more interested professionals and the

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<sup>10</sup> This procedure consists of obtaining the overall idea of each interview by reading it; subsequently, define the units of meaning and name the prevailing topic in these units, thematically organize the expressions, and associate the units of meaning with the purposes of the research (Kvale, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> There are investigative journalism digital media whose work intersects with environmental journalism, such as the special project Resistencias, carried out by Pie de página between 2017 and 2018 (<https://especiales.piedepagina.mx/resistencias/>); and data journalism media, such as the Belleza concesionada project, from La Data (<http://www.ladata.mx/BellezaConcesionada/>).

possible presence of stories on environmental problems on the front pages, it has not managed to establish itself as part of the editorial architecture of the traditional media.

"The issue has gained importance," says Hernández Márquez, "in the country, at the drafting tables, it is no longer an unheard of issue, but rather an important issue." Zapien Osuna, on the contrary, affirms that "there is a lagged valuation of the subject in the traditional media, except for spectacularity or when there are extraordinary situations." Tajonar Méndez points out that in the traditional media environmental notes are covered by opportunism, by people who do not know the issues they address, which distorts the information they publish.

The three interviewees observe a small number of specialized professionals and also a deficient training of environmental journalists, which represents a huge weakness in the objective of placing environmental issues on the public agenda. In their case, all three have sought their own training, in a constant effort.

"The environmental issue is very complex because it involves putting a lot of hard science and social sciences into it," says Hernández. Zapien Osuna recognizes that the exercise of environmental journalism involves significant efforts, as it is an area where it is not easy to specialize. This forces her to work with greater care and look for context: "even if it is a small note, which seems very simple, I have to read, look for additional information to see if how I am approaching it, or if that term that I am using, is correct". Tajonar Méndez also notices this challenge for herself: "I don't even call myself an expert, because there are many issues that escape me and I have to turn to sources and ask them to explain me" -

Each of them solves their knowledge deficits on disciplines or specialized topics with their own methods and resources; All three turn to experts, academics, or scientists on the issues they need to understand to process and explain the information to their audiences, and they also study the issues in documentary and bibliographic sources when required. The importance of this preparation translates into a professional and productive result that, it is hoped, will be useful for the audiences. Environmental journalism, says Tajonar Méndez, "is not a task for everyone."

#### *4.1.2. Concept and ethical principles of journalism*

The interviewees propose definitions of environmental journalism that range from journalism on socio-environmental issues to a perspective –the complexity– in addressing practically every social issue. For Hernández Márquez it is a journalism focused on issues of sustainability and quality of life and, therefore, a cross-cutting issue to the social world; Tajonar Méndez defines it as investigative journalism, as well as of reporting, related to socio-environmental issues. Zapien Osuna observes environmental journalism as a reflection of socio-environmental problems, complex and at the same time fundamental.

As a whole, environmental journalism is investigative, immersive, and of investment, which produces few (quantitatively speaking) sophisticated and higher quality

materials, from a cognitive and reflective point of view, which requires space and time to be achieved. This condition is even associated with the human and professional maturity of the journalist; that is, "we are not even of age anymore. We are not interested in making notes, in simply recording isolated events without generating an in-depth explanation", Hernández Márquez explains.

Environmental journalism is, above all, contextualized, says Hernández Márquez; which for Zapien Osuna means that it must "give people examples of how the environmental crisis is affecting their daily lives". The Sinaloan journalist adds that, besides the proximity, environmental journalism must be related to local identity and culture: "lowering it to the local level makes you connect with people because they already feel that it has to do with their family, their environment, their culture, their identity", she adds.

Is environmental journalism useful? The three agree that the first utility of environmental journalism is to provide in a broad perspective the informative elements that allow people to understand environmental issues beyond the facts, but rather the causes, the actors, the consequences, the processes, the contexts. This work, Hernández Márquez points out, provides tools for people to act if they decide to do so: "It is intended that it also serves as a kind of civic tool so that at a certain moment it can help social action... I don't even know in what sense, because in the end it is decided by the people; if they do or not, and to what extent do they commit to doing so".

Gradually, environmental journalism goes from elementary information so that people can realize how a certain situation affects them and can influence it (Tajonar Méndez), to the expansion of "evolved audiences that seek more in-depth information and quality" (Hernández Márquez). With this term, the director of Verde Bandera refers to people who are more educated or interested in the most important information: "It is not even a matter of looking for elitism in terms of readers, rather it is a matter of they can be better elaborated journalistic products, and from being better elaborated, have a greater impact; have more tools, have more support than in the legal issue, than in the scientific issue, and be, from that holistic production framework, even more, interesting than that fleeting and banal information that is out there ", he explains.

Is it activism journalism? Hernández Márquez and Zapien Osuna reject this denomination; Tajonar Méndez affirms it. Zapien Osuna points out that journalism is a profession marked by its rigor: "journalism is journalism regardless of what topic and has its rules. Of course, to dedicate yourself to the environmental issue is because your heart is there and because you have those principles, because you agree with these issues ", but this does not force a militancy, because this journalism, with its sole task, serves environmental causes, helps to make a problem visible, and also to propose possible solutions. Hernández Márquez also considers that the mobilization to change the state of things corresponds to the social actors. Tajonar Méndez considers that this journalism is very close to the people, which implies a personal position: "we cannot be desk journalists, but we have to get involved with the communities, with

the animal rights defenders, with all the struggles that exist. I think that as journalists we should walk with them”.

#### 4.1.3. EJ Independent Digital Media Landscape

The emergence of alternative digital media represents a very favorable opportunity for the development of environmental journalism, the three interviewees agree. The contents are permanently and freely accessible to interested readers from anywhere in the world, which gives visibility to the issues that are published in them (Tajonar Méndez). Besides, being out of the rhythm of industrialized production of news information, Hernández Méndez explains, these media can allow themselves to analyze, understand, and reflect on problems in a holistic way, so "being marginal does not necessarily mean a disadvantage, in terms of work". It is possible to say, with Zapien Osuna, that "the highest quality proposals in environmental journalism in the country are independent and digital."

However, the situation of the independent digital media of environmental journalism is far from being stable or definitive, particularly –and in this situation, the three studied media are registered– to guarantee the financial autonomy that allows them to continue their operation and increase the number of collaborators, to be able to cover a greater number of socio-environmental issues from the journalistic point of view, with the desired level of quality, which allows offering readers a vast panorama of topics of potential interest, while expanding the audiences for this information. This is "a challenge for those of us who try to have a better quality of readers, based on better journalistic products," says Hernández Márquez.

In a complicated and challenging context for journalism in general and the resolution of socio-environmental problems, the greatest possibilities for the consolidation of independent media are within them, Hernández Márquez assures: "the environmental journalism media must be deeper and more rigorous. We have to be more journalists”.

Hernández Márquez sees in the current situation an opportunity to continue evolving, both at the individual level of the journalist and of the journalistic companies, in the interest of contributing to social change, based on a change in the *civilizational vision* of what is normal today, towards other perspectives of sustainability and human self-containment.

I think that vision has to change from journalism so that it can transcend society. Because the treatment of information, in general, is based on the human being, our needs, our tastes, and what we feel is our right, which is to be the species that everything deserves, regardless of whether this affects one, or many, species. But those are already big words, to permeate an environmental culture that transforms the vision of the human being, that we are not the sun on the planet. I agree that this would be the next stage, but it is necessary (Hernández Márquez).

## 4.2. Discussion

At the same time that its importance is recognized in various social sectors, environmental journalism that takes place in Mexico is a marginal activity compared to *general* journalism and public communication, despite the relevance it may have to influence the formation of a Holistic and alert opinion about socio-environmental problems. In this scenario, why insist on seeking the expansion and consolidation of environmental journalism in Mexico? Its producers (in this case the directors of independent digital media) maintain that this work is necessary to give people tools to have an informed opinion and elements that promote and facilitate possible social action. For them, it also means a necessary stage of personal and professional development, by taking the journalistic practice to other stages that imply greater challenges, knowledge, and even a much more critical vision than that usually exercised in this professional field. It also corresponds to the complexity of the era and its challenges for life on the planet.

Whether or not there is interest among the populations about environmental problems, these must be known, appropriate, and addressed by the societies involved. In the first task, the work of environmental journalism is essential, particularly with the provision of content close to immediate realities and the daily context, where people can see themselves as actors who have social responsibilities and an agency to directly influence their environments, rather than as consumers saturated with other people's information (Cimadevilla, 2005).

Environmental journalism uses investigative journalism techniques and tends to delve into the structural conditions and causes of socio-environmental conflicts or, at least, to relate human influence to the occurrence of these types of events. Under these characteristics, it is possible to affirm that environmental journalism, as a specialty, has perhaps two decades of development in Mexico and has been characterized as a marginal practice in the traditional information media.

Since the traditional news media are not interested in opening their own spaces to this type of information, the approach and exposure of socio-environmental problems are left to other social actors, as indicated at the beginning of this article, within which the journalists and the digital media of environmental journalism play an important role. Still marginally, and with the constant challenge of being able to maintain their operation, they define a minimum reference base for the required task.

The advent of the Internet transformed the traditional scheme of mass media and allowed the emergence of specialized alternatives, both in the segmentation of audiences and topic, favoring the creation of independent digital media for environmental journalism. The internet opens up unlimited spaces and great possibilities for interaction with sources and interlocutors, generating opportunities to transform the dynamics and information flows, and allows the importance of the local to be placed above other distant dimensions. This neutralizes the tendency to present environmental problems in public communication as something external has led to the disconnection or disinterest of people in environmental problems, as Alcoceba (2004) warns.

The alternative that the internet means for the specialized media also allows the exploration of other gradients in the informational approaches, where the more anthropocentric ones cease to dominate and spaces are opened to biocentric, critical and complex visions, where the human-environment relationship is direct and general appreciation goes beyond the common parameters of measurement of the environmental “problem”.

The digital media studied –Tierra baldia, Verde Bandera, and Son playas– carry out important work on a local scale, as they connect environmental problems with the local population. They are references for other news media that lack sections or journalists specialized in environmental matters and also constitute an alternative for sectors interested in this type of information, such as academics, researchers, experts, public officials, civil society organizations, communities, among others, both as sources of consultation and spaces for discussion of specific issues of regional interest.

These media develop professional environmental journalism that recognizes its deficiencies and turns them into challenges for its own consolidation, among them the need for constant training and the study of other disciplines; maintaining a holistic and complex vision of the problems, identifying the first causes beyond the visible and spectacular events; maintaining creativity. Zapien Osuna, in particular, proposes local journalism based on proximity characteristics, on the cultural and ecosystem identity of the populations, to recover or strengthen the awareness of human-nature relationship and interconnection, which favors decision-making and social participation in socio-environmental problems. Without being an activist, environmental journalism offers extensive and profuse tools for socio-environmental causes with only its work.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Various studies have been prepared on environmental journalism, mainly content analysis and critical reviews in which a *failure* of the traditional news media is inferred in its alleged obligation to “educate society in the values linked to sustainability and ecology.” (Picó, 2017), besides reporting rigorously on events that affect the lives of populations. Such a presumption lacks solid foundations and tends to overshadow the responsibilities that other governmental and social instances have in this regard, by assigning the media to educate society on sustainability. But environmental journalism assumes a strong commitment in the sense of providing useful information tools for reflection and taking a position on the part of people regarding socio-environmental problems, which represents the essential stage for a possible organization and social action.

Is environmental journalism being enough? If to the few initiatives that exist in the country of this type of journalism are added its economic vulnerability, its incipient influence in local contexts against an overwhelming cultural trend, environmental journalism has in itself a huge challenge: the deconstruction of its current paradigms, that allows it to create a countercultural perspective, more critical of the economic, political, and social processes that propitiate planetary deterioration and, in this way,



contribute to a necessary transformation of said civilizational paradigms. This is notorious in the traditional media, where, despite the growing importance that could be given to environmental issues, their editorial treatment has not necessarily improved.

The qualities and challenges of three digital media of environmental journalism that operate in three states of the country have been reviewed in this text. It has been seen, from the responses of the interviewees, that in the world of Mexican environmental journalism the personality and professional trajectory of the subjects who exercise it are key to understanding the emergence of specialized independent digital media. It has also been identified that the main vulnerability of these companies is financing since they are freely accessible and are not successful in attracting advertising and, or public funding that allows them to be self-sustaining for their basic operation, and less for an expansion in the structure of collaborators that allow them to cover more research, and even, to sustain the indispensable human team through the acquisition of fees. Without aiming for profit, it is necessary for this type of project to achieve long-term financial viability that allows it to focus on the development of useful content for the challenges posed by the multiple socio-environmental problems existing at all geographic scales.

It is necessary to strengthen this type of initiative if the consolidation of environmental journalism that responds to the country's and global challenges is sought. Environmental journalism could be seen as a content specialization but, apparently, it constitutes rather a new stage in the evolution of journalism and environmental communication that the time needs to face civilizing challenges.

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## **AUTHOR**

### **Raquel Aparicio Cid**

Ph.D. in Educational Research from the Veracruzana University, Professor in Environmental Education from the University of Guadalajara, and Bachelor of Journalism. She is currently attached to the Education Research Institute of the Veracruzana University, she is a postgraduate professor. She has formulated and implemented communication strategies for government and civil organizations, with a focus on environmental and societal issues, particularly forests, climate change, resilience, sustainability, and social participation. She has developed investigative journalism on environmental issues. Her research interests are oriented to environmental communication, the semiotics of nature, local knowledge systems, and social epistemic practices related to human-environmental ways of relationship.

[raparicio@uv.mx](mailto:raparicio@uv.mx)

**ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0711-1769>

**Google Scholar:** <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=a9w6SNsAAAAJ&hl=en>

**Researchgate:** [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Raquel\\_Cid4](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Raquel_Cid4)

**Annex 1. Profile of the digital media of environmental journalism studied**

<i>Name</i>	Tierra baldía	Verde bandera	Son Playas
URL	<a href="http://www.tierrabaldia.com.mx">www.tierrabaldia.com.mx</a>	<a href="https://verdebandera.mx/">https://verdebandera.mx/</a>	<a href="https://sonplayas.com">https://sonplayas.com</a>
Place and year of foundation	Puebla, Puebla. 2011	Guadalajara, Jalisco. June, 2011	Mazatlán, Sinaloa. March, 2019
Director	María del Carmen Tajonar Méndez	Sergio Hernández Márquez	Raquel Zapien Osuna
Objective	"Disseminate environmental issues of relevance in Mexico that promote the sustainable development of an active and participatory society that demands truthful and quality information, which provides knowledge through impeccable journalistic materials for the construction of a culture of harmony, respect, and peace with us, with our environment, and with all of life".	"Raise awareness of environmental issues seeking to empower citizens to take action and decisions based on useful, truthful, and scientifically supported information" [Mission].	"Contribute to the knowledge, appreciation, and conservation of the natural environment, especially the coastal one. From a local point of view, but with a global perspective, Son Playas intends to make visible the challenges posed by the climate crisis and the conservation efforts that are carried out from different areas of civil society, organizations, and institutions. We believe that no change is possible without citizen participation, which is why people are the central axis in the content of this journalistic platform".
Collaborators	The variable collaboration of about 16 researchers, journalists, and collaborators with disciplinary backgrounds ranging from communication, environmental engineering, biology, environmental criminology, psychology, graphic design, photography, environmental law, to postgraduate degrees in physics, communication, and ecology.	Eight journalists collaborate continuously, as well as a similar number of experts and researchers in water, anthropology, and education, among others. The site has agreements with four news agencies and replicates information from entities such as the University of Guadalajara, United Nations.	About nine journalists, researchers, and experts collaborate, whose professions span journalism, environmental activism, history, archeology, and coastal zone management.
Sections	Regional, National, International, Death projects, Climate change, Extinction, Citizen participation, Water, Conservation, Waste, Sustainable technologies, Pets, Whales.	Sustainable City, Water, Environmental Policy, Nature, Climate Change, Companies, Opinion.	Home, Beaches, Environment, Fishing, Tourism, Community, Local Consume, Global Village.

Topics	Extractive projects, local socio-environmental problems, social action, ecosystems, biodiversity, environmental footprint, environmental regulations, corruption, human health, environmental psychology and health, climate change, environmental deterioration, conservation, water, clean energy, sustainability, international agreements, public events, and social.	Socio-environmental conflicts, urban sustainability, light, land and water pollution; human rights and environment, social mobilization, corruption, technological impacts, government programs and policies, biodiversity, ecosystem conservation, environmental crimes, community forestry, and production companies, food security, climate change, international agreements, clean energy.	Sustainable fishing, beach conservation, marine habitat and biodiversity, nature and cultural identity, local socio-environmental problems, terrestrial ecosystems, archeology, history, food, local food companies, conservation, urban projects, tourism industry and environmental impact, environmental crimes, urban waste, human health, environmental regulations, environmental education, conservation initiatives, and pro-environmental social action.
Genre	News, opinion, announcements, and video and audio capsules.	News, opinions, reportage, academic articles, and interviews.	Notes, reportage, opinion, academic articles, literary texts.
Financing	It offers spaces for advertising and requires funding, although none of these mechanisms is currently used. It does not generate its own income.	Access is free; does not require payment for subscriptions. It has a public funding scheme that so far has not received any contribution. It does not generate its own income.	The site is freely accessible; does not require subscription payment, and offers spaces for advertising, except government one. It has no income of its own.
Achievements	According to its director, Tierra baldia has managed to become a reference in environmental journalism in the state of Puebla; their notes are frequently replicated by other local news media and is consulted by municipal and state public officials, experts, academics, activists, and university students of the entity.	It has had a growing recognition in various sectors of the state of Jalisco that influence the public agenda of the environmental issue, as well as experts, academics, and scientists, according to its director. It has won two state journalism awards (2012 and 2014). This site, says its director, aspires to become a reference medium on environmental journalism in the region.	The site, according to its director, has generated great interest at the regional level among social, commercial, political, academic, and activist sectors, and at the national level among the environmental journalism union. It intends to make this site a benchmark for environmental journalism in Mazatlán and southern Sinaloa, to promote environmental issues on the public agenda.

**Source:** Self-made.