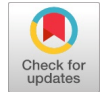


Framing of Environmental News through Constructive Journalism in the Indian Context

Lekshmi Priya Sanal, I. Arul Aram



Abstract: *Mainstream media often deem environmental news non-newsworthy owing to the lack of audience interest. This could be attributed to the lackadaisical treatment that environmental issues receive, which either presents these in an esoteric manner beyond audience comprehension or through non-engaging coverage to keep up with the bandwagon. The internet access boom has helped environmental groups and non-government organisations present and advocate for various environmental issues, including climate change. It would hold great significance for environmental communication research to study how these issues are being explored and the real-time impact and mobilisation of the audience. Constructive journalism is a growing field that addresses various social issues, including environmental concerns, through the lens of positive psychology and solution-based approaches. Its proliferation across new media platforms makes the scope of studying environmental issues more extensive. This study employs frame analysis to examine the frames employed in constructive environmental stories by media platforms, including The Better India and Mongabay India. A total of 285 stories between 2021 and 2022 were analysed using Nambiar's typology of environmental frames, and it was found that constructive news elements in environmental stories may do well towards raising environmental consciousness among the audience and call to action.*

Keywords: *Constructive Journalism, Environmental Journalism, New Media, Positive Psychology, Solutions.*

Abbreviations:

TBI: The Better India

I. INTRODUCTION

Various studies have been conducted over the decades to understand the representation of environmental issues in mainstream and alternative media platforms. Scholars have explored and identified different frames to comprehend if ecological problems could be approached in ways that could reach and impact the audience better in comparison to the general apathetic and unscientific manner of coverage [1].

For instance, a longitudinal study on the coverage of anthropogenic contribution to climate change in the US print and television media revealed the framing of the issue to be informationally deficient, in terms of informing the public [2].

A study in Greece on national and provincial newspapers found deficiencies in environmental reportage and noted the need for journalists' education on environmental issues as well as scientists' contribution to augment environmental reportage [3]. Kostarella et al. highlighted the pressure on Greek media houses owned by business conglomerates engaged in environmental undertakings that further quashes environmental reportage [4]. On the other hand, Tong's analysis of how environmental issues are framed in Chinese newspapers correlates with the significance of critical reflective discourse in investigative reporting [5] and a study on framing of environmental issues in English and Tamil language newspapers in India highlighted the need for more sensitive coverage that may pave the way for better understanding of complex issues among the public [6]. Other studies include comparative environmental framing in news stories published by Pakistani and British media [7] and textual analysis of environmental frames in Indian news media that found existing ideological, political and cultural biases to affect public perception of environmental issues negatively [8].

Since its recognition as a domain in the 1960s [9], environmental journalism has remained a topic of contention, concerning the nature and extent of coverage of issues. Unlike other beats, environmental stories rarely receive screen time or print space, despite the persistence of serious environmental concerns, such as global warming and climate change, in recent years. Even worse is the current scenario, where most major news organisations and establishments around the world either do not have an established environmental beat, or have assigned journalists and reporters who often lack the scientific temper that is required while dealing with serious environmental issues [10].

Environmental news is often deemed as non-newsworthy and non-revenue-generating by media organisations. On the other hand, they blame the audience's lack of interest. This could be attributed to the ineffective way mainstream media addresses environmental issues, presenting concerns in jargon that is beyond the comprehension of audiences, or covering ecological news in an unscientific and non-engaging manner to keep up with the bandwagon. Traditional media has seldom ventured beyond reporting about environmental issues, which are almost always laced with a negativity bias [11].

However, digital penetration and internet accessibility have given environmental groups and non-profit organisations the chance to present and advocate for various environmental issues, including climate change. This is significant for ecological communication research, which studies how these issues are being explored and the real-time impact and mobilisation of the audience.

In India, environmental news

Manuscript received on 01 March 2025 | First Revised Manuscript received on 11 March 2025 | Second Revised Manuscript received on 17 May 2025 | Manuscript Accepted on 15 June 2025 | Manuscript published on 30 June 2025.

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platforms such as the India Environment Portal, Down to Earth, and Mongabay India have consistently published stories ranging from serious topics, such as climate change, to more localised ones, including eco-friendly farming methods and lifestyle change measures. Alongside the alternative media platform, The Better India (TBI) has been covering environment issues through constructive narratives that have found a widening audience and claims to impact them through call-to-action. Studies on such environmental reporting and framing styles in contrast to mainstream reporting in India are crucial. With an ever-changing and evolving media climate, such studies may aid researchers in the fields of environmental journalism as well as communication to understand if such techniques work better (or not) than the latter in engaging the audience and inculcating a consciousness towards ecological issues.

Irrespective of the beat, frame analysis is a powerful tool for studying news media and its implications on its audience. This paper aims to examine the various frames employed by news platforms in environmental coverage that utilise the constructive journalism framework in India. However, constructive journalism as a genre is relatively recent, and what exactly is constructive may differ not just theoretically but also in application, leading to a certain “lack of conceptual clarity” [12].

McIntyre and Gyldensted define the genre as “an emerging form of journalism that involves applying positive psychology techniques to news processes and production to create productive and engaging coverage, while holding to journalism’s core functions” [13]. Amidst various positive psychology methods identified by pertinent scholars worldwide, a solutions-centric approach to news writing, beyond just reporting or offering commentary on existing social issues, has been recognised as one of the key facets of constructive journalism. In recent years, solutions journalism has also emerged as a genre by itself, gaining prominence in the Global South concerning climate communication [14]. One may consider this genre as a by-product of constructive journalism. To avoid ambiguity and narrow down pertinent Indian environmental news portals, this study focused on the solutions-based parameter under the constructive journalism framework. Mongabay India and The Better India (TBI) were shortlisted, as the former has an exclusive solutions-based series titled *Eco Hope*, while the latter markets itself as a positive and solutions-based news platform that covers all social areas, including the environment. All environmental stories by The Better India and *Eco Hope* stories by Mongabay India published between January 2021 and December 2022 were identified for the analysis.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

First introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman [15], frames are described as “organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to structure the social world meaningfully” [16]. According to Gamson and Modigliani, a frame is “a central organising idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” [17].

Further, a news frame demonstrates how an issue is put together through an inclusion of “certain associations, attributes, judgments, or decisions” [18]. A journalist may

pick up an issue purely through selection, but how it is presented to the audience and what they make out of it depends on how it has been framed. The process aids people towards developing “a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorienting their thinking about an issue” [19].

According to de Vreese, news frames can be issue-specific and generic. While the former can be identified as pertaining only to topics or events, the latter can be labelled as frames that “transcend thematic limitations and can be applied to different topics, some even over time and in different cultural contexts” [20]. Semetko and Valkenburg [21] opined that more frames had general applicability than issue-specific ones, and they identified five generic frames in the media: ‘conflict’, ‘human interest’, ‘attribution of responsibility’, ‘morality’, and ‘economic consequences’.

The environment domain also encompasses pertinent frames in the media. Nisbet and Newman [22] put together a comprehensive typology of frames following their analysis of multiple studies on environmental communication. These include: social progress, economic development/competitiveness, morality/ethics, scientific/technical uncertainty, Pandora’s box/runaway science/fatalism, public accountability/governance, middle way / alternative path, and conflict/strategy.

In the Indian milieu, Nambiar [23] did a case study analysis of environment and sustainability reporting and identified standard frames employed by the Indian English Language Press between 2007 and 2009. These are as follows: Concern for the Welfare of the Marginalised, Activism, the Scientific Frame, Morality, Governmental Accountability, Exemplary Practice, Local Evidence, Human Interest, Blame, Empowerment Support, Changing Paradigms, Politics, the International Perspective, Urgency, Expert Opinions, Balance, Crisis, Conflict and Controversy, a Developed World Ploy, and Lifestyle Change and Personal Responsibility.

Concerning recent developments in journalism, constructive journalism is a growing domain that addresses various social issues, including those related to the environment, through positive psychology and solution-based approaches.

Besides McIntyre and Gyldensted’s definition, the Netherlands-based Constructive Institute calls constructive journalism a movement emerging as “a response to increasing tabloidisation, sensationalism and negativity bias of the news media today. It is an approach that aims to provide audiences with a fair, accurate and contextualised picture of the world, without overemphasising the negative and what is going wrong” [24]. Calling constructive journalism the “next megatrend in journalism”, Haagerup tries to find answers to questions like “Why is the news media so negative? What are the consequences? Does it do society any good? Does a good story have to be a bad story? Can we save journalism by helping it save the world? How can we improve before it is too late?” [25].

Among digital versions of mainstream print media establishments, such as The Times of India, The Hindu, and Hindustan Times, all three publications regularly published environment stories. However,



The Times of India had no dedicated section for environment stories, and one has to take the extra effort of using the search option to look for these. Also, many stories just metaphorically included the term 'environment', so such articles could not be considered. Environment stories by *Hindustan Times* were categorised under the Science section, and searching for older stories is not user-friendly. *The Hindu* had a Sci-Tech section, under which an environmental sub-section was placed. While the ecological stories in this publication were extensive and well-researched, one needs to have subscribed (paid or online account) to the portal to access older articles.

A constructive approach is yet to be observed in regular news coverage by mainstream media institutions in India, let alone environmental stories. Alternative media platforms, such as The Better India (TBI) and Mongabay India, are setting the example and changing the narrative by incorporating constructive approaches in their news coverage. All environmental stories about TBI and an exclusive solutions-based section titled 'Eco Hope' by the ecological news platform Mongabay India have been observed to follow a constructive narrative and offer practical solutions. The proliferation of these platforms across new media makes the scope of studying environmental issues in India under the lens of constructive journalism extensive and novel.

This research examines the coverage of environmental issues in India within the framework of constructive journalism, employing frame analysis to investigate the various frames used by these platforms to report recent ecological news.

III. METHODOLOGY

The paper employs frame analysis to examine the various frames used in the 285 environmental stories published by The Better India and Mongabay India between January 2021 and December 2022. These stories follow the solutions-based approach in news writing under the constructive journalism framework. Nambiar's typology of environmental frames has been adapted as the analytical framework to differentiate the frames.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In India, very few publications have been observed to employ a constructive, solutions-centric approach in their news stories, especially in environmental coverage. The Better India (TBI) is an alternative media platform that began in 2008. It started as a positive news platform, adopting a constructive approach to its coverage of issues over the past few years. Alongside this, many environmental websites and blogs have actively reported grave ecological problems. However, only Mongabay India was found to have an exclusive solutions-based news series focusing on environmental issues across India.

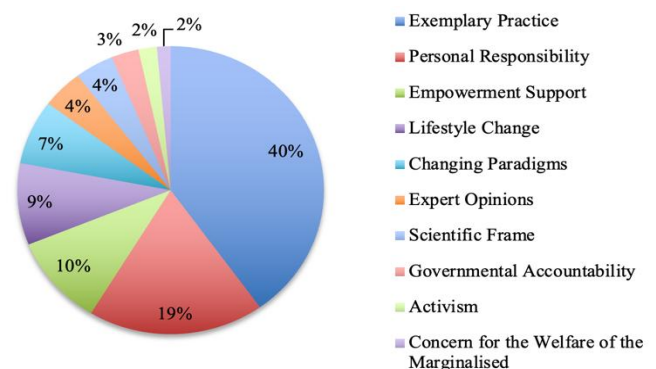
Two hundred twenty-three stories from TBI and 62 stories from Mongabay India published between 1 January 2021 and

31 December 2022 fit into 10 frames out of 20 frames of the Nambiar typology.

Table- I: Frames of Environmental Stories in the Better India and Mongabay India's Eco Hope Series Between January 2021 and December 2022

S. no	Frames	The Better India	Mongabay India
1.	Exemplary Practice	166	37
2.	Personal Responsibility	77	9
3.	Empowerment Support	42	15
4.	Lifestyle Change	38	2
5.	Changing Paradigms	30	1
6.	Expert Opinions	18	19
7.	Scientific Frame	17	24
8.	Governmental Accountability	12	8
9.	Activism	8	1
10.	Concern for the Welfare of the Marginalised	6	-

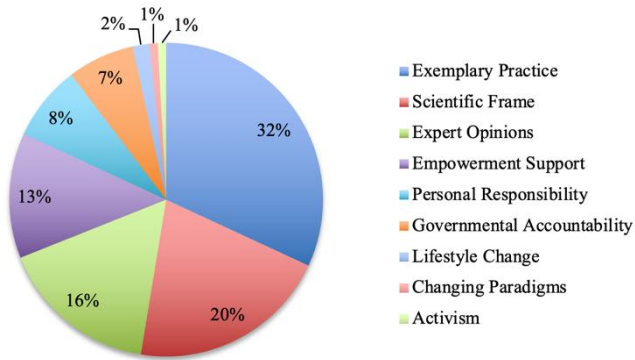
In contrast to the general framing mechanism observed in mainstream media stories, almost all stories covered by both platforms were not limited to a single frame. They were often distributed over two or sometimes three angles. Hence, [Table I.](#) illustrates all the frames prominently showcased in these stories. The researchers limited the findings to two frames per story to avoid ambiguity.



[Fig.1:Frames of Environmental Stories in the Better India Between January 2021 and December 2022]

Out of the 20 frames outlined by Nambiar, only 10 frames were observed in TBI stories, namely Exemplary Practice (166), Personal Responsibility (77), Empowerment Support (42), Lifestyle Change (38), Changing Paradigms (30), Expert Opinions (18), Scientific Frame (17), Governmental Accountability (12), Activism (8) and Concern for the Welfare of the Marginalised (6). In Mongabay India stories, nine frames that were observed include: Exemplary Practice (37), Scientific Frame (24), Expert Opinions (19), Empowerment Support (15), Personal Responsibility (9), Governmental Accountability (8), Lifestyle Change (2), Changing Paradigms (1) and Activism (1).

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[Fig.2: Frames of Environmental Stories in Mongabay India Between January 2021 and December 2022]

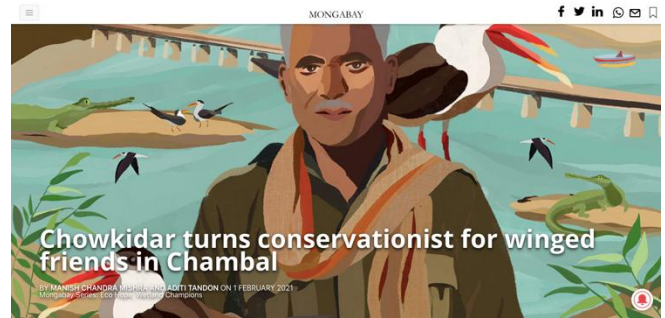
Most commonly emerging frames in TBI stories (as illustrated in [Figure 1](#)) were Exemplary Practice (40%) and Personal Responsibility (19%), while stories of Mongabay India (as illustrated in [Figure 2](#)) were primarily focused on Exemplary Practice (32%) and Scientific Frame (20%). Both platforms' stories under the Scientific Frame addressed scientific issues and offered comprehensive yet straightforward explanations. For instance, the significance of Indian grasslands is discussed in depth in one article concerning biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation goals and includes extensive comments from scientists and researchers [26].

The Exemplary Practice frame showcased environmental heroes and celebrated their crusades, as well as shared eco-friendly practices adopted by various urban and rural communities across India. One example ([Figure 3](#)) under this frame is that of a young man who teamed up with a group of like-minded people and turned a 100-acre stretch of barren land near the Tamil Nadu-Karnataka border into a green oasis, replete with about 40,000 trees [27].



[Fig.3: Example of Exemplary Practice Frame. Source: The Better India]

Stories with the Personal Responsibility frame focused on individuals who took up various environmental issues as their responsibility to the environment and shared stories of success and hardships. Such stories on both platforms involved a restorative narrative but also did not shy away from including personal struggles, administrative criticism, and public apathy as and when pertinent. For instance, one story ([Figure 4](#)) covers the life and struggles of a watchman who has spent over a decade towards the conservation of skimmer birds in the Chambal region of Madhya Pradesh [28].



[Fig.4: Example of Personal Responsibility Frame. Source: Mongabay India]

The Lifestyle Change frame, observed mainly in TBI stories, highlighted stories of ordinary urban people whose lifestyle changes were pro-environmental and reported in a manner appealing to the audience, inspiring them to adopt these practices themselves. An example is that of a Bengaluru man who built an eco-friendly and sustainable house from natural materials like mud and reclaimed wood, uses biogas three hours a day, and also has a terrace garden [29].

Stories that fell under the Empowerment Support frame across both platforms included empowerment stories of rural and marginalised communities, ranging from livelihood to capacity building. Most of these stories focused on the success stories of women and self-help groups through a restorative narrative. Mongabay India shared a story ([Figure 5](#)) that featured a network of women water warriors in a district of Madhya Pradesh who have been successfully able to lead their drought-prone villages towards water security [30].



[Fig.5: Example of Empowerment Support Frame. Source: Mongabay India]

The Governmental Accountability frame included stories highlighting good governance in environmental matters. In contrast, stories under the Expert Opinions frame focused on a specific issue and featured numerous experts in the field sharing their anecdotes and explanations. A tale of a young leader of a village in Uttar Pradesh and her efforts in making the town go plastic-free falls under the governmental accountability frame [31]. A great example of expert opinion framing in Mongabay India stories was found in a story featuring Kerala's home gardens as a natural solution towards mitigating climate change [32].

The most striking observation in all 285 stories under the constructive journalism framework is that they had a conversational tone and were comprehensive, despite addressing serious environmental concerns. Yet



another aspect emerging in this style of framing and reportage, particularly by TBI, is the inclusion of contact details of protagonists in the stories. One could deduce from this observation that the platform intends to connect its audience with these individuals, inviting environmental consciousness through call-to-action and community participation, ultimately the end goals of constructive journalism.

It was also observed that stories on the environment and pertinent issues had the highest frequency in June, similar to those on mainstream platforms. One could correlate this with the aspect of June 5 being commemorated as World Environment Day and many organisations dedicating the entire month to cover the environment with the enthusiasm they usually do not harbour towards the domain otherwise. These platforms also followed the bandwagon. Another observation was that the number of stories on both platforms had decreased in consecutive years. Specifically, 123 and 41 stories were published by TBI and Mongabay India in 2021, whereas these numbers narrowed down to 100 and 21 stories, respectively, in 2022. One could attribute this to the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions that may have prevented more stories from coming to light.

V. CONCLUSION

As found in this study, the environmental frames used by the new media platforms The Better India (TBI) and Mongabay India do not differ significantly from the 20 ecological frames identified by Nambiar in her case study analysis of environmental and sustainability reporting in Indian mainstream newspapers.

The environmental frames used within the constructive framework are identical to those of their mainstream counterparts. However, the reason these alternative platforms are gaining public attention and engagement could be attributed to their constructive and solution-centred approach to addressing serious environmental concerns. This holds promise for the future of environmental journalism. Even so, prolonged audience support and independent funding for such platforms are crucial for their sustainability.

At the same time, governmental or corporate support may come at the cost of such platforms becoming organisational mouthpieces that may or may not undo the efforts of environmental activists, organisations and well-meaning citizens. There is a prevailing stance in the mainstream that emphasises development over environment, as well as a discernible antagonism against environmental journalists worldwide. The independent nature of such media platforms enables a constructive yet unbiased reportage of ecological issues, celebrating its champions while also addressing social concerns and shortcomings that need to be addressed. More news media platforms should explore constructive journalism to initiate the much-needed change in the domain of environmental communication.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

After aggregating input from all authors, I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

- **Conflicts of Interest/ Competing Interests:** Based on my understanding, this article has no conflicts of interest.
- **Funding Support:** This article has not been funded by any organisations or agencies. This independence ensures that the research is conducted with objectivity and without any external influence.
- **Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate:** The content of this article does not necessitate ethical approval or consent to participate with supporting documentation.
- **Data Access Statement and Material Availability:** The adequate resources of this article are publicly accessible.
- **Author's Contributions:** The authorship of this article is contributed equally to all participating individuals.

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