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ACTIVISM IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM:

how four key moments have helped shape an engagement practice in Brazil



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ABSTRACT – This article is based on bibliographical research and discusses the presence of activism in environmental journalism since its beginnings (the last quarter of the 20th century). This study discusses the development of activism in Brazil based on studies in the field from the Environmental Journalism Research Group at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, and environmental news produced by the Environmental Journalism Observatory. The opposition to environmental injustices makes this journalistic perspective an engaged practice that is often overlooked by the field as it breaks from the supposed objectivity or neutrality. Among the results, we highlight a greater openness to the defense of nature, either because of the intensification of the climate crisis or because of the changes that occur in the journalistic field, such as the appreciation of subjectiveness.

Key words: Environmental journalism. Activism. Engagement. Advocacy journalism.

O ATIVISMO NO JORNALISMO AMBIENTAL: como quatro momentos-chave ajudaram a configurar uma prática engajada no Brasil

RESUMO – Este artigo, baseado em pesquisa bibliográfica, discute como o ativismo está presente no jornalismo ambiental desde seus primórdios, no último quarto do século XX. A partir do acompanhamento dos estudos na área no âmbito do Grupo de Pesquisa Jornalismo Ambiental, da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, e da produção jornalística voltada para o meio ambiente, realizada pelo Observatório de Jornalismo Ambiental, discorre sobre o desenvolvimento da atividade no Brasil sob a perspectiva do ativismo. A oposição diante das injustiças ambientais fez dessa perspectiva jornalística uma prática engajada e, por isso, muitas vezes menosprezada pelo campo por romper com a suposta objetividade ou neutralidade. Dentre os resultados, apontamos uma maior abertura para a defesa da natureza, seja em razão da intensificação da crise climática, seja pelas transformações que ocorrem no âmbito jornalístico, como a valorização das subjetividades.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo ambiental. Ativismo. Engajamento. Jornalismo de causas.

ACTIVISMO EN EL PERIODISMO AMBIENTAL: cómo cuatro momentos clave ayudaron a dar forma a una práctica comprometida en Brasil

RESUMEN – La objetividad ayudó a consolidar la idea de que el periodista debe ser un observador neutral de la realidad. Uno de los cánones del periodismo, la estrategia, método o ritual ha sido criticado desde el siglo pasado, ya que los hechos son informados a través de la selección, jerarquía e interpretación. Marcado por una actuación pragmático-funcional, el ethos profesional impidió la reflexión sobre las prácticas. En el siglo XXI, sin embargo, el discurso de la objetividad se ha visto cada vez más cuestionado, especialmente por los “nuevos arreglos periodísticos” (Nonato et al., 2018), que abogan por causas. La hipótesis – confirmada por el artículo – es que estas iniciativas están contribuyendo a la tensión del ethos profesional. En el contexto del nuevo ecosistema periodístico, tomar partido se convierte en un valor a perseguir, y ya no en una transgresión deontológica. Para comprobarlo, se entrevistó a nueve periodistas de estos “nuevos arreglos”.

Palabras clave: Objetividad periodística. Activismo. Causas. Compromiso. Ethos profesional.

1 Introduction

Environmental journalism can be understood as a field with its own laws (Bourdieu, 2004), as a space for struggles, or “[...] an arena where opposition or competition is at stake between agents who hold different positions” (Lahire, 2017, p. 65). To be part of this field, a journalist needs to incorporate the ecological habitus¹ – only then will he or she be able to play the game. In this sense, environmental journalism assimilates knowledge and environmental rationality (Leff, 2002, 2016), which makes them see the world from

the perspective of ecological tensions. Isabel Cristina de Moura Carvalho (personal communication, November 13, 2018) states:

An ecological logic is a logic that cannot be reduced to the Western human way, to a human way of producing truth. The idea of truth is deeply questioned in this perspective, especially the polar idea of truth: logic exists and does not exist. This binary logic that we are accustomed to within a certain Western philosophical tradition [...] becomes very poor at understanding the multiple manifestations and expressions of the world.

For Frome (2008, p. 60), environmental journalism is a way of “looking at the world and oneself”, highlighting the need for ecological literacy (Girardi et al., 2021) and a different understanding of the asymmetrical relationships that connect humanity and nature. We are facing a global environmental crisis of an anthropogenic nature with different local consequences, but the share of responsibility and the conditions for coping are completely different and unequal. According to Brum (2021, p. 70), “those who consumed the planet were a rich minority, mostly white, located in the north of the globe [...], associated with the extractive financial elites of the southern countries, most of them converted into nations by the colonial project”.

Another important component of this habitus is activism, present since the emergence of the practice. Activism, engagement, or supporting environmental causes is highlighted by different authors in the area from several countries around the world. This activist stance is internationally recognized as a characteristic of environmental journalism, while also questioned within the professional field itself. Detjen (2002), who was president of the International Federation of Environmental Journalists between 1994 and 2000, pointed out the United States’ need for objectivity mixed with engagement when covering sustainability issues.

Gavirati (2013), from Argentina, defended ecologically oriented journalism as a way of renewing journalism. Spain sometimes labels environmental journalists as activists, and many of the professionals interviewed by Mercado-Sáez and Chavez (2020) felt uncomfortable with this label. Leading environmental journalists in Brazil, interviewed by Belmonte (2020), also stated that activism is still frowned upon in major newsrooms. According to Bavadam (2010), the reliability of environmental journalists in India who are engaged in the environmental agenda is also doubted, as if covering environmental issues was not important.

In China, Tong (2017) demonstrated from interviews with professionals that an activist stance is fundamental to building the knowledge needed for one to perform investigative environmental journalism. Bueno (2007), Frome (2008) and Girardi et al. (2012) understand the position of the neutral mediator (internalized by hegemonic journalism due to the values of modernity) as something serving only capitalist interests (Mendes Pereira, 2014).

Although the discussion is not new at an international level, we observed several gaps in the record of practices and ways of thinking about activist journalism in the south, particularly little knowledge of how this trajectory occurred in the specific contexts of countries superabundant in socio and biodiversity, but which continue to be guided by a colonialist perspective, of exploitation of nature in favor of progress associated with countries that developed due to a process crossed by environmental injustices.

For us to contribute to discussions about the positioning of journalism in general, we based our bibliographical research (Stumpf, 2015) on the relationships between environmental journalism and activism in Brazil, and included representative examples of each key moment which we found in surveys from previous studies of media outlets covering the environment (Belmonte, 2020; Loose, 2021)². We seek to show that this demand for a type of journalism that overcomes dehumanization or defends a common collective cause has already been present at the heart of environmental journalism. Not only is this arena of internal combat not new, but it has also been part of the constitution of Brazilian environmental journalism since the last quarter of the 20th century. For this purpose, our bibliography is within the scope of the Research Group on Environmental Journalism, established in 2008 at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)³, and also specialized environmental journalism websites in Brazil monitored by the Observatory of Environmental Journalism, a university extension program created in 2019 (also at UFRGS) which involves researchers from different regions of the country.

In this article, we focus on three theoretical paths: the debate about what environmental journalism is (especially in Brazil), its connections with activism, and the critique of objectivity. We list four key moments that have helped shape specialized environmental coverage in Brazil, highlighting the combative aspect of each phase: 1) the environmentalization of society; 2) the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as Rio-92

or Eco-92; 3) the emergence of a new, networked media ecosystem; and more recently, 4) the inevitable climate emergency.

2 The four key moments of Brazilian environmental journalism

For each of the four key moments, we discuss how the advancement of Brazilian environmental journalism has come to criticize news coverage that disregards inequalities and conceals the losses resulting from a development model that exploits nature and those who live in it, from an anthropocentric and colonialist point of view. Atilés-Osoria (2013) maintains that environmental colonialism already goes beyond the exercise of biopower over the country as it includes a sociopolitical and legal structure that makes the consented exploitation of nature and those who live there possible, highlighting the intersection between dehumanization and the destruction of nature. Along the same lines, Moraes (2022, p. 36) claims that coloniality and objectivity start from the same project of “othering – that is, of taking everything that does not fit into the predetermined models of existence and defining it as strange, exotic, or even disposable”.

We understand objectivity from the perspective of realist philosophy, meaning that the reality of things and the semantic reality of things are different. It is based on the idea that a journalist makes value judgments on the events he or she reports on. Raw data (object) has no value if it is removed from the subjectivity of the subject who perceives them, the one who can relate and interpret them (Muñoz-Torres, 2002). Fact Judgments and value judgments are interconnected. This same author goes on to state that the impossibility of separating facts from values does not mean the non-existence of facts. Every act of knowledge requires a relationship between subject and object, and in environmental journalism, that subject is ecologically oriented.

We draw attention to how a certain way of speaking, one that is not committed to reporting facts, contributes toward maintaining a *status quo* that has already proven to be unsustainable. Porto-Gonçalves (2006, p. 61) claims that “the environmental challenge is at the heart of contradictions of the modern colonial world. After all, the idea of progress and its more current version, development,

is synonymous with dominating nature!”. Here we oppose the reductionist view of nature as a natural resource or as synonymous with flora and fauna, understanding the multiplicity of confrontations and cooperation among all species, including humans.

2.1 Origins: the process of environmentalizing a society

Environmental journalism in Brazil comes from environmentalizing the society, a social phenomenon that influences this specific theme and is also influenced by it: macro and microcosms feed one another (Belmonte, 2020). We understand the expression ‘environmentalizing [the society]’ as a neologism for “new phenomena or new perceptions of phenomena from a process point of view” (Lopes, 2006, p. 34).

The environmental crisis (already declared a global issue in the 1960s and 70s, which increased in severity over the last 25 years of the twentieth century to become a climate emergency) is a result of how we understand and live in the world. “The environmental issue has become a socioenvironmental issue, the way it constitutes a social order and disregards its natural conditions” (Leff, 2016, p. 141). The author also claims this is a crisis of knowledge, “generated by the ways of thinking, of knowing, and of intervening in the world; a way of producing reality about the world that, by becoming hegemonic, dominating and global, has built an unsustainable world” (p. 140). Mattedi (2002, p. 130) states: “the modern environmental issues spread the idea that we are facing an ever more threatening and harsher world, one we ourselves built, which ends up constituting a special type of risk”. The environment has become a real issue “because it is like an institutionalized interrogation that mobilizes and organizes social representations” (Almeida & Premebida, 2014, p. 25).

This process of environmentalizing the society intensified in Brazil in the 1970s with Brazilian civil society defending the environment (Urban, 2001), and then creating a nebulous association (Acselrad, 2010) with several agendas and different forms of action. This environmentalization also occurred in official organs from all three levels of government (federal, state, and municipal) through the creation of the National Environment Policy (LAW Nº 6.938, August 31, 1981). Environmentalization occurred in companies, in the 1990s, through the advancement of certifications and the ideal

of social responsibility (Kishiname et al., 2002). Brazilian journalists from major newsrooms and alternative media outlets started to regularly report on the relationship between society and nature in the 1970s (Belmonte, 2017).

The influence of environmental movements during this period meant that the environmental issue, slowly but surely, gained space in mainstream media outlets, especially in the form of denouncements. One of the pioneers, journalist Randau Marques⁴, exposed the pollution problem in Cubatão in the *Jornal da Tarde*, in 1980 (Marques, 2005). Many others such as Liana John, Teresa Urban, Washington Novaes, Silvestre Gorgulho, Juarez Tosi, Edilson Martins, and Lúcio Flávio Pinto were also pioneers of the environmental debate in newsrooms.

The first steps in Brazilian environmental journalism were taken with the support of the emerging environmental movement, technicians from official bodies, and scientists who were more critical of the predatory economic development model. In order to ensure that the topics became news, sources in the scientific field were consulted. “The difference between the 1980s and the 1970s was the increase in the volume of information [about the environment] and the greater presence of scientific sources” (Barros & Lima, 2012, p. 4). This increase was a strategy adopted to increase the credibility of reports on environmental topics.

After analyzing the magazines *Veja* and *Isto É*, and the newspapers *O Estado de S.Paulo*, *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *Jornal do Brasil*, between 1972 and 1992, Barros (2003) found that “the press only began to attribute more importance to the subject when it came to be recognized as scientific knowledge, legitimized by the scientific community and society itself” (p. 85). For this author, the Brazilian press and its discourse on the environment during the aforementioned period was more directly related to official state discourse than it was to scientific discourse.

According to journalist Liana John, at the time, it was important to listen to the polluter’s side. “The closest thing to bias we allowed for in this journalism was: ‘well, I’m in favor of the environment. And I am’. Nowadays you have to know what you are talking about. You have to read up on the things you are talking about. That was an 80s thing” (L. John, personal communication, September 28, 2018). Liana’s work as a journalist at *Agência Estado*, between 1988 and 2003, helped to disseminate the environmental

agenda throughout Brazil, thanks to the national coverage of Grupo Estado's journalistic service.

Even though journalists, in the beginning, did admit to having a personal pro-environmental stance when reporting, they wanted to make it clear to others what being a journalist meant (the objective professional) and what it meant to support the environment – as if it were possible to separate such subjectivities. As Moraes (2022, p. 147) explains, based on Russel (2016), activism was related “[...] to the suggestion of an absence of objectivity”, something that could mischaracterize the practice and compromise the credibility of the profession.

2.2 Rio-92

In addition to starting to listen to more scientific sources in the 1980s (Barros, 2003) and having journalism be recognized as something important (L. John, personal communication, September 28, 2018), this coverage gradually began to undergo another transformation. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992, was an event that consolidated Brazilian environmental journalism, as discussed by Belmonte (2017). To assess the coverage before, during and after Rio-92, Ramos (1996) analyzed articles published in the *Folha de S.Paulo* and *O Estado de S.Paulo* newspapers between June 1, 1991, and July 11, 1992, and of television news on Rede Globo and the now extinct Rede Manchete between May 4, 1992, and July 11, 1992. According to his research, economic interests were a priority in the environmental message from newspapers. This same study also considered the number of articles on business with ecological products to be significant, and determined that the number of citations from sources linked to non-governmental organizations, universities and social movements was low.

During the preparatory meetings for Rio-92, when specialization in the environment was widely disseminated in Brazilian journalism, two terms were used to describe professionals who worked in this new area: environmental journalists and eco-journalists. The former, closer to scientific journalism, was influenced by American journalism, where the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) was created in 1990. The latter, more aligned with

the environmental movement, gained prominence in Brazil with the creation (also in 1990) of the Eco-journalist Center of Rio Grande do Sul, the first Brazilian entity to unite journalists who were active in fighting for the environment. The term eco-journalist has a different meaning, as described by Petrarca (2008) in a sociological study on eco-journalists in Rio Grande do Sul. “The use of the term ‘eco-journalist’, or ‘environmentalist journalist’ (a term coined by Petrarca herself), represented an important break from commercial newspapers, connecting journalism to the defense of the environment and moving it closer to the interests behind ecological movements” (Petrarca, 2008, pp. 38-39).

The expression ‘ecological journalism’ also described this proximity between journalism and ecological movements, as in this statement made by journalist Fernando Gabeira when speaking at the Journalists’ Seminar on Population and Environment, promoted by the National Federation of Journalists (FENAJ) in 1989. “I think that ecological journalism in Brazil is reaching an impasse similar to that of the ecological movement. We report too much” (Gabeira, 1989, p. 52). The journalist also highlighted, at this event, the need to present possible solutions to the published complaints.

In Spain, the term ‘ecological’ was used as an adjective to describe journalism that specialized in environmental issues, but environmental journalism became the dominant term.

By the end of 1994, the established vocabulary appeared in the Asociación de Periodistas de Información Ambiental (APIA). Therefore, specialist professionals detach themselves from any confusion that could come from using the term “ecological” due to its ideological charge and reaffirm themselves in the environment as a professional exercise (Fernández-Reyes, 2003, p. 148).

The term environmental became predominant in Spain and Brazil. “Ecological, however, is more conflictive because it is associated with ideology, commitment, indoctrination, dogma, activism, fighting, etc. It is without doubt, a term loaded with intentionality and with revolutionary resonances for many” (Fernández-Reyes, 1995, as cited in Fernández-Reyes, 2003, p. 147). This semantic distinction between environmental and ecological is also cited by I. C. M. Carvalho (personal communication, November 13, 2018) when she explains how she preferred the term ecological epistemologies to environmental epistemology. The term ecological is more related

to a systemic context, of a continuity between humans and non-humans, whereas the term environmental seems, in her opinion, very humanized.

The term eco-journalist or eco-journalism is rarely used in Brazil. However, the activist label associated with 'eco' is present in the definition of environmental journalism developed by Bueno (2007) and Girardi et al. (2012), and also in the practice of several specialized environmental journalists who, in many cases, demonstrate their activist stance, going beyond simply mediating information to change the established social reality (Belmonte, 2020). Girardi et al. (2011, p. 108) understand that "environmental journalists hope to encourage their audiences to act, helping to reduce environmental aggressions and trying to preserve the quality of life". Even using the adjective 'environmental', in order to be better accepted among their peers, journalism professionals continue to affirm their ecological habitus to guarantee the sustainability of life (Leff, 2016). The epistemological foundations of this field reiterate the need to challenge the established powers in the face of the unequal distribution of the established system: more than denouncing or criticizing the current development model and modern logic, on which the journalistic foundations are based, this field tries to change the ways of thinking (Girardi et al., 2012). Through qualified information and understanding that journalism is a form of non-formal education that has a wide reach among the population, we seek to contribute to another form of relationship between society and nature.

Discussions about sustainable development which, after Rio-92, began to be widely disseminated as a kind of belief in the possibility of adapting economic growth to environmental preservation and social justice, caused the media (which previously avoided the issue) to start including it as a business opportunity. What was previously viewed as an obstacle to development (seen strictly as an increase in wealth) became a new way of reshaping the capitalist economy. This reformist economic inclination was eventually incorporated into environmental coverage. Specialists from different areas try to merge the interests of large groups with remedial solutions, that is, find a solution where large groups that consider the exploitation of nature inevitable can agree on forms of compensation or other smaller measures that will not result in depleting the planet.

It is important to remember that this discourse is present in different forms of journalism, even referring to itself as

environmental even when it is far from the ecological habitus. The supposed journalistic objectivity or neutrality ends up naturalizing the destruction of biodiversity and all environmental burdens in favor of increasing the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Neoliberalism and all its problems are not questioned, they are represented as something that is given, a “natural force” that imposes itself (Guilbert, 2020) and cannot be interrupted (other development options are rarely presented by journalism). In terms of the environmental challenge, there is a continued discourse that argues it is not possible to develop (a prerequisite for ending poverty and social injustice) without generating negative fallouts.

As such, parts of the ecological discourse are appropriated by subjects who are aligned with economic rationality, which has led to the contemporary environmental crisis. This ends up being confused with other forms of communication about the environment that promote the socio-environmental responsibility of certain corporations. However, in addition to greenwashing, there are some current initiatives aimed at the environmental agenda (journalism on environmental issues) but which tend to silence the contradictions between economic and environmental rationalities because they are spaces financed by companies with interests in keeping everything as it is or by “green” capitalism.

We understand that this could be a strategy used by recognized media outlets, as is the case with Grupo Globo and its editorial “*Um Só Planeta*”⁵ (in English, “Only One Planet”), which has been signed by 21 media outlets and currently has five sponsors (Aegea, Ambev, Eletrobras, Gerdau and Banco do Brasil). Daily material on the environment has a strong economic bias that does give visibility to the issue but actually adds to a system that is opposed to ecological habitus. It is not by accident that investigative reports never appear in these spaces. Another issue is how much the newspapers abandon real journalistic work, that does not compromise its supporters, in favor of other products like branded content, which on the surface might appear to be similar to news and reports but value a brand or an association to a company with a cause. “Branded Content is neither journalism nor advertising. It is a hybrid form that uses advertising and journalism techniques to relate to customers effectively” (Povinel, 2020, p. 67). The perception of (eco)activism in environmental journalism is often negative, but when there is a pro-market activist position that economically supports media vehicles,

the discourse is one of objectivity. The question is: who does this ideology of supposed neutrality serve?

2.3 Society online

Structural changes can be seen in professional journalism and they include, in the systematization proposed by Pereira and Adghirni (2011), new forms of news production, processes of digital convergence, and the business model crisis of journalistic companies. This third key moment, which began in 2004 with the creation of the environmental journalism website O Eco, highlights the emergence of alternative and/or independent journalistic initiatives that specialize in environmental coverage. Environmental journalism used to depend on specialized editorials and sections to circulate, but with the popularization of the internet and the ease of maintaining websites, blogs, and social networks, this specialized practice has expanded into different perspectives, highlighting pro-environmental stances that used to be erased by traditional editorial lines that, since their beginnings, were based on the values of truth, independence, objectivity, and the notion of service (Traquina, 2005).

These values mask the fact that there is a conflict between objectivity and the provision of services in the public interest, where choices and sides are always taken. According to Miguel and Biroli (2010), even though journalists have different ideological positions, they tend to occupy similar positions in the social space, the result of common socialization and training which ends up influencing certain perspectives. This leads to universalized points of view that, under the auspices of objectivity, hide the complexity and power struggles that permeate society.

We must also consider the interests of large media groups, which have strong political and economic connections (Guilbert, 2020) and, as a result, share similar worldviews and make content by and for those who achieve some benefit. Even the discourses that try to remain neutral when reporting facts present a certain level of subjectivity, from the way those who build the news view the world to market pressures and the audience the news reports to. For Alsina (2009), objectivity is a key aspect of understanding the ideology of the liberal press model. Miguel and Biroli (2010, p. 72) state:

In conventional journalism standards, hegemonic discourses are reproduced as carriers of "universal" values. Opposing discourses, in turn, are either silenced or do not become public unless as verbal stereotypes, oscillating between the mimesis of dominant patterns of expression and their presentation as absolute "others".

The non-dependence on large groups to maintain journalistic production about the environment allowed several specific positions in favor of environmental care to emerge. In order to exemplify this new moment, we present two journalistic websites on environmental issues: *Conexão Planeta* and *#Colabora*, launched in August and November 2015. Both projects, analyzed by Loose (2021), are purposeful and openly engaged in environmental activism and the fight against environmental injustice:

#Colabora – Sustainable Journalism is committed to sustainability that goes far beyond the environment. [...] We believe that the planet will only be sustainable if it manages to solve not just its environmental problems, but also its social problems. [...] However, beyond the awards, the reason that *#Colabora – Sustainable Journalism* exists is to be a legacy, a purpose, believing in our ability to help change the world in which we live. And the certainty that it can be increasingly economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and socially fair. (*Colabora*, n.d⁶)

[...] In addition to a passion for writing, what moves us is activism, the certainty that by spreading and disseminating relevant stories and news, we are on the right path. Nothing inspires us more than being able to report on the actions of committed and visionary people, who prove that we have the tools, technology, and knowledge necessary to move towards a happier future. [...] Our mission is Inspire to Action. We hope that with each report, more and more Brazilians are encouraged to take part in this great movement. (*Conexão Planeta*, n.d⁷)

In addition to defending the environment and taking an active stance in favor of a more sustainable world, these sites, and similar ones studied by Belmonte (2020) and monitored by the Environmental Journalism Observatory at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, share characteristics of alternative journalism; they propose to do something that hegemonic journalism does not do and seek to promote the liberation of citizens. In addition to questions about project financing, this form of journalism embraces its position and challenges the naturalization of journalism based on objectivity. Colodeti (2016) states that this journalism questions the modes of representation, the main sources used by journalists, the narrative models, and the very subordination of journalism to capitalist interests.

Even though objectivity is connected to trust and credibility with the public and to a market value for the media (McQuail, 2013), it is not as present in alternative media, even if there are attempts to use it (and other values of mainstream journalism) to differentiate itself from amateur (Carvalho & Bronosky, 2017). These practices have historically been associated with social change and are therefore present with the goal of citizen communication and activism or engagement (Kenix, 2011).

We also point to more sources from civil society being heard, emphasizing other approaches (different from those of authority or academic titles). Occurring during a period of greater institutional professionalization for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), there is greater space for activists and representatives of the third sector to appear in environmental coverage, with more or less emphasis depending on each media outlet's editorial line. Canella (2023) believes journalistic practice is never neutral, and truths are not disinterested. In a recent study, he notes that professional journalists have started to face competition from new actors on social media in recent years, which also changes the scenario. The professionals he interviewed, however, recognize that it is difficult to build journalistic credibility around activism.

The strengthening of advocacy⁸ actions by civil society across networks broadens the understanding of how journalism can help schedule public debate and promote public policies of public interest. This allows us to observe more counterpoints to the economic bias in the scope of environmental journalism. Brüggemann et al. (2022) emphasize that the ecological threats (which have intensified in recent years) require journalists to adopt a new stance, far removed from the idea of a distant and neutral observer. For these authors, this has led to several changes to the way journalism is practiced and to more traditional views of environmental journalism, in particular, using the profession to defend sustainability or a public commodity.

Academically speaking, the epistemological suppositions that should guide ecologically oriented practice have evolved. An innovator in Brazil in this type of work is Wilson Bueno (2007), who defines activism (in a non-partisan way) as taking care of the environment and listening to information sources that have different points of view from the ones that reinforce dominant thinking.

Bueno (2007) deals with the functions of environmental journalism, going beyond the tradition of just informing. For him,

environmental journalism plays a pedagogical and political role in contributing toward building a new understanding of society/nature relations. Studies by researcher Ilza Girardi (who has worked with and studied the interconnection between journalism and the environment for more than 25 years) show that one of the foundations of this work is a commitment to qualify environmental information and to encourage a change in thinking (one that is more coherent with ecological values). Journalistic neutrality is called into question, as well as criticism of coloniality and questions about what maintains the *status quo* (Loose & Girardi, 2021).

These suppositions are in line with international research that has identified the use of objectivity as a disguise for positioning that no longer makes sense. Laws and Chojnicka (2020) recognize the importance of historical, social, and political contexts when building knowledge. They reject the possibility that a report can be truly objective and thus propose the following differentiation: progressive (or regressive) advocacy journalism and *status quo* advocacy journalism (Laws & Chojnicka, 2020, p. 2), reminding us that reports that appear to be progressive may not bring about change if they do not challenge the dominant liberal ideology.

2.4 The climate emergency

The last key moment we analyze is the recognition of the climate crisis or emergency, where several problems intertwine and affect each other, and which have gained more prominence in the public agenda in Brazil due to the Bolsonaro government's environmental dismantling policy (2019-2022). The growth in climate change, for instance, is directly related to the loss of biodiversity, which is linked to the expansion of monocultures, and in turn is linked to the issue of pesticides and chemical fertilizers which contaminate the air, the water, the soil, and contribute to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, causing harm to species.

We can also observe the expansion of livestock farming in forest areas, which leads to deforestation, extinction of species, and changes to the climate. Excessive consumption (or consumerism) leads to a number of individual environmental problems (more waste production, increased exploitation of natural goods, more energy expenditure, etc.) and is also linked to the climate crisis, after all,

all stages of producing goods involve activities that emit a certain amount of GHG.

However, there are so many environmental problems that some end up garnering more attention than others. The climate crisis is being addressed by different global actors, either due to the urgency and scale of the problem or because reducing carbon emissions forces a change in attitude that can benefit problems on a microscale. There is a global understanding that the climate issue is a consequence of the type of predatory development adopted and defended (Gligo et al., 2020). Thus, it is to be expected that environmental discourses will be updated as a result of the fight against climate change.

Although the causes and effects of climate change are widely known by the scientific community, changing this scenario would require major changes to the political-economic system we have today. As a result, several sectors recognize the climate risks but actions to face them are either being left to the future or associated with palliative actions that do not result in any significant changes – nor the effects necessary to stop the advance of climate consequences (Loose, 2021). This positioning has changed over time but still requires further change.

On one hand, we have lobbying from those who benefit from an archaic economic system, and on the other, we have a dispute for new market opportunities linked to reformist green capitalism, one that promotes ecological production. Abranches (2010, pp. 40-41) highlights the conflict of interests between these two sides, which are not only about financial ambitions but also the power of influence in the established system:

Companies linked to the high-carbon economy – that is, the intensive use of fossil fuels and high greenhouse gas emissions – play hard and invest a lot in postponing decisions to change, in fighting evidence that shows the need for quick and radical action. Companies that use clean technologies want quick decisions so they aren't the only ones paying the cost of the transition. They know that they will be more competitive in a low-carbon economy, with renewable energy and low greenhouse gas emissions.

In this way, we identify that even those who are proposing alternatives to help combat environmental issues may be doing so to maintain an advantage in a capitalist system, which is based on extractivism and the idea that environmental damage is just a side

effect of the process. This ideology is not new, but it is taking on new forms. In the case of climate change, the green economy is now referred to as a low-carbon or even zero-carbon economy (which is only possible through compensations). Looking at the environmental issue from an economic perspective, any cause or solution that intervenes in the capitalist production model is either minimized or erased, further distancing itself from any connection between humanity and the planet.

The strong incentive for the carbon market and the payment of environmental assets is part of this new scenario of superficial solutions based on an ideology that understands it is possible to maintain economic growth as we know it and, at the same time, add to the environmental concern. Moreno (2016) points out that the green economy discourse was shaped into a “potent unifying narrative”, uniting actors that were rooted in the established system and creating new market fronts for other actors who were interested in making their businesses green.

On the other hand, in terms of the urgency and severity of the climate crisis, some journalists believe in the need to overcome the modern-colonial worldview that led us here. Thus, current environmental journalism, in addition to being committed to the environment and another journalistic goal (more plural, contextualized, and complex), seeks to encourage its audiences to be engaged in the issues. In the first decades, the informative and pedagogical functions were what took priority, the understanding was that citizens could make better decisions based on qualified materials; however, today the emphasis is on the political function, which in some cases is seen as advocacy journalism.

In Brazil, the climate crisis is closely associated with the Amazon biome. It is the largest tropical forest in the world and its deforestation is a major source of GHG emissions. By drawing the eyes of the world toward the Amazon, journalist Eliane Brum (2021) calls for a shift in perspective, claiming that in order to address the climate crisis and the sixth mass extinction of species, we need to learn to stand together with indigenous peoples and traditional forest communities such as quilombolas and riverside dwellers. The SUMAÚMA platform was created in 2022 and is based in Altamira, Médio Xingu, in the state of Pará. The platform reports on the lives and conflicts throughout the biodiversity of the Amazon. The manifesto, published on the platform, clearly states its position:

The forest – its nature and its people – needs to come before the market. This is an approach based on both cutting-edge climate science and traditional indigenous thinking. There are, however, powerful and violent threats from companies and corporations, governments and politicians, and organized crime. As journalists, we position ourselves alongside forest peoples on the front line of the war against nature [...]. Living in war is not a choice, this war is already there and you just need to open your eyes to see that it is progressing very quickly. We can only choose to fight or not to fight. (Sumaúma, n.d⁹)

Other journalistic spaces such as O Eco, Repórter Brasil, InfoAmazônia, and Amazônia Real have already presented this characteristic as an important differentiator, demonstrating that defending the environment is part of their commitment to the public interest. What could everyone have more in common than the survival of the ecosystem on which we depend to live? The change we detected in this case refers to how the environment is covered by breaking from the existing journalistic logic that is forged within the expansion of capitalism, based on the precepts of modernity.

It is important to note that not all those who defend the environment call themselves environmental journalists, even if they have adopted the ecological habitus. One example is journalist Eliane Brum, who rejects the label of environmental journalism because she believes it just sounds like a specialty. Research conducted by the Environmental Journalism Research Group (UFRGS/CNPq) demonstrates that environmental coverage is not necessarily coverage that assimilates environmental knowledge, and therefore environmental journalism is differentiated from journalism that is by/about the environment (Girardi, Loose & Silva, 2018). However, this distinction is not always made and there are misunderstandings in the field. We emphasize that this field was born as a specialty, but seeks to make its habitus mainstream through the understanding that we will only have a future when the ecological perspective is naturalized by different sectors of society. What SUMAÚMA claims it does is what environmental journalism defends:

SUMAÚMA is not just a platform for the environment nor is it just environmental journalism. Our understanding of these worlds is not compartmentalized: we understand that the climate crisis affects all topics and that is how it should be treated by journalism. It is a comprehensive prism and not just another topic. We can only cover the brutality of a human minority capable of causing a mass extinction of species and putting their own children at risk of a hostile future if we understand that the war against nature is shaped by power relations based on race, gender, class, and also species. The climate crisis is

caused by inequalities and increases these inequalities, as those most affected by it are indigenous and black people, women, and the many species already in danger of extinction. (Sumaúma, n.d.¹⁰)

The environmentalization of the agenda, which is already making headway in some newsrooms, is accelerated in the face of the realization that we are causing our own extinction, after all, we are also nature. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the financing of these initiatives continues to be a challenge for expanding the practice (Koop, 2020). In Brazil, there is still no public policy to finance environmental journalism.

3 Final considerations

The discussion raised in this article maintains that environmental journalism is at the forefront of a new way to produce the news, one that is more distant and critical compared to the habitus of mainstream journalism, which is still strongly supported by objectivity and neutrality (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021). Environmental journalists have been pioneers not only in Brazil, but in several countries, by challenging the supposed objectivity in favor of defending the environment (Fahy, 2018), raising questions, and challenging the rigid *modus operandi* to help evolve another worldview.

The path taken by Brazilian environmental journalism over the last five decades demonstrates that the engagement of professionals, strongly influenced by ecological movements to promote the environmentalization of society, is still present in journalism. Even though social conditions, firmly tied to objectivity and neutrality, masked this position (through the appeal to scientific sources, for example) or emphasized a marketing bias from Rio-92 onwards, environmental journalism has used a series of ecologically oriented subjects that have opened spaces in traditional media outlets to shed more light on this issue and have it taken more seriously. Our text points out how environmental journalism in Brazil has developed into specific forms of production, ones that have a different view of the environment and understand it as an issue of public interest, quite opposite from a neutral position.

With the proliferation of the internet and tools that have

benefitted large corporations, alternative and independent initiatives that contest media concentration and monolithic representations welcome the environmental debate and fight environmental injustices in different ways than our modern colonial system. The engagement has become more clearly expressed in editorial proposals and also encourages the public to support the cause. Subjectivity is not concealed because there is external criticism, after all, everyone ultimately feels the effects of the climate crisis to a greater or lesser extent. What was once a problem that seemed distant, one that future generations would have to deal with, has arrived on our doorstep and revealed the disconnection we have with the planet.

Given the present climate crisis, activism in journalism is not only compatible with its logic; it is also necessary and crucial in order to resist the effects that are already in motion. We are not referring here to activism that solely focuses on market solutions and the environmental crisis summarized as green business opportunities. We are referring to a professional activism whose agenda fights (Moraes, 2022) against environmental injustices that affect the most vulnerable populations. This will only be possible if ecologically oriented subjects work in journalism.

The climate crisis is a fact; it is serious and affects everyone in different ways. We could say that it brings together a series of newsworthiness criteria to enter the public agenda on a daily basis; however, as Moraes (2022) reminds us, it is social values that guide the prominence of such criteria. As the ecological habitus is not part of journalistic culture in general, and the fragmentation of knowledge is the norm, few journalists are able to identify the environmental perspective beyond very specific demands. Even though the environment constitutes everything, journalists have been taught to simplify, reduce, and compartmentalize facts into boxes, according to the principles of modern science, which are the foundations of the practice. Similarly, they value objectivity and reject subjectivity (as if this were possible) using such questions as a pretext to exempt themselves from the representations they construct. Nevertheless, the planet is reaching its limits, ones that can irreversibly affect the Earth's regenerative capacity and, consequently, the continuation of life. We therefore believe that ecologically oriented activist journalism is necessary.

NOTES

- 1 Habitus is understood as a set of mental frameworks linked to the worldviews of agents in each field, which guide their actions in certain social conditions (Ortiz, 1983).
- 2 For the study by Belmonte (2020), research was conducted on media outlets that cover the environment through messages circulating on the Brazilian Environmental Journalism Network, a Google search using the keyword “environmental journalism” and monitoring of analyses published weekly in the Environmental Journalism Observatory. Loose (2021), focusing on non-hegemonic environmental media, started with an initiative by the Public Agency called “Map of Independent Journalism”, selecting those media outlets with greater production about the climate.
- 3 The aforementioned Research Group, coordinated by Dr. Ilza Girardi, is one of the oldest in Brazil with constant production in the field.
- 4 Based on the news stories of journalist Randau Marques (1949-2020), the city of Cubatão, located in the Baixada Santista region, 70 kilometers from São Paulo, came to be known as the ‘Valley of Death’ due to the diseases and malformations caused by the toxic emissions from 24 companies in the petrochemical and steel industry complex established there, including Rhodia. These emissions particularly affected the residents, especially newborns. The situation was so severe in the 1980s that the city was considered by the United Nations as the most polluted in the world. As a result of Marques’ investigative reports, the situation was eventually reversed. Marques also actively participated in the environmental movement in the state of São Paulo and was one of the founders of SOS Mata Atlântica, an important Brazilian environmental organization.
- 5 The Environmental Journalism Observatory has already looked into this media outlet and found out how this coverage occurs. We share two analyses about this initiative: <https://jornalismoe meioambiente.com/2021/05/24/jornalismo-ou-comunicacao-ambiental/> and <https://jornalismoe meioambiente.com/2021/05/03/conteudos-patrocinados-vao-esvaziar-ainda-mais-a-dimensao-coletiva-e-politica-da-pauta-ambiental/>. The five companies currently

sponsoring the editorial movement of Grupo Globo are all large business organizations. Aegea is a leader in the private sector of basic sanitation in Brazil; Ambev, the largest brewery in Latin America, is part of Anheuser-Busch Inbev; Eletrobras, privatized in 2022 when the Brazilian government ceased to be the main shareholder, is a leader in the generation and transmission of electrical energy in the country; Gerdau is the largest Brazilian multinational steel producer; and Banco do Brasil, a mixed economy company controlled by the federal government, is the second-largest banking institution in the country in terms of assets. Previous sponsors also included Vivo, the largest telecommunications company in the country, and Engie, a leading company in renewable energy.

- 6 Retrieved from <https://projetocolabora.com.br/quem-somos>
- 7 Retrieved fro <https://conexaoplaneta.com.br/sobre>
- 8 Advocacy is a term used by civil society organizations that defend collective interests, such as environmental issues. Unlike lobbying, which is also used to influence public policies, advocacy is not practiced by sectors or companies that seek out specific government benefits. The Spanish and Portuguese translations have not yet been consolidated and raise some debates, but interpretations can be found that associate it with the defense of causes.
- 9 Retrieved from <https://sumauma.com>. Sumaúma and Eliane Brum's proposal has also been analyzed by the Environmental Journalism Observatory: <https://jornalismoemambiente.com/2022/02/28/o-jornalismo-ambiental-em-eliane-brum/> and <https://jornalismoemambiente.com/2022/09/19/sumauma-um-portal-de-jornalismo-no-centro-da-floresta/>.
- 10 Retrieved from <https://sumauma.com/quem-somos>

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