

THESIS

BEYOND THE ADVOCATE LABEL: ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS' ROLE
CONCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES IN AN ERA OF CLIMATE URGENCY

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND THE ADVOCATE LABEL: ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS' ROLE CONCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES IN AN ERA OF CLIMATE URGENCY

Environmental journalists have increasingly incorporated social media into their professional practices, a trend that has prompted scholarly examination of how these digital platforms influence journalistic norms. While research has explored journalists' social media use broadly, limited attention has been paid to factors affecting environmental journalists' online decisions specifically. This study investigated how different professional role conception factor into environmental journalists' social media behaviors by applying Role Theory and Journalistic Role Conceptions frameworks. Focusing on the longstanding tension between objectivity and advocacy in environmental reporting, the research explored how interpretive and advocacy role orientations shaped online practices. Through in-depth interviews with 14 environmental journalists, this study revealed that role conceptions influenced intentions but rarely manifested in distinctly different social media behaviors, with factors including credibility concerns, source relationships, and safety considerations proving more influential than role orientation. The findings contribute to understanding the unique challenges environmental journalists face in digital spaces where reporting on environmental issues is often automatically perceived as advocacy.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Overview and Rationales

Social media has become an increasing part of people's lives, and for a while now, it has also been an important part of the journalism industry. Social media can be understood as any kind of online media where people participate in open conversation and connect with others (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). Newspaper organizations and journalists started to use social media and have a presence online to share their stories in a way that could reach a bigger audience, among other reasons. Nowadays, many journalists have professional or personal accounts that they actively use to improve their work. For example, Twitter (now identified as X) is a social media platform journalists use to find sources and information, build networking, publish, and promote their news stories online (Broersma & Graham, 2013).

Journalists using social media such as X as part of their work routines is something already normalized by different scholars, with professionals mixing traditional journalist norms with social media norms (Molyneux & Mourao, 2017). The literature has explored journalism practices for a while now. Van Eck et al. (2019) for example, explain that journalistic norms act as guidelines for how journalists should behave and what patterns they should follow when it comes to reporting the news.

More recently, however, different scholars have been adding the social media aspect to their studies by trying to address the changes in journalists' norms and practices since the advent of the internet and social media. Diehl et al. (2019) view the integration of social media into journalism as challenging. They note that while some journalistic norms remain unchanged, others—like objectivity—may be influenced by social media practices, creating tension between

traditional and new approaches. The objectivity norm has been the subject of studies in many journalistic fields. For this study, we propose to focus on environmental journalists. In the face of accelerating climate change and its far-reaching impacts, the role of environmental journalism has never been more crucial. Compared to previous years, the urgency in addressing climate change has increased, considering that it is happening more quickly than anticipated (United Nations, 2019). Environmental journalists play a vital role in informing the public about complex scientific issues, highlighting the urgency of environmental challenges, and potentially spurring action to mitigate climate change. Environmental journalism can be defined as the “researching, verifying, writing, producing, and broadcasting of news about the environment to the public sphere” (Pezzullo & Cox, 2017, p. 92).

Environmental journalism can be seen as a crisis and risk discipline once the topics are associated with risks to the public (Cox, 2017; Howart, 2013). Among the topics explored, climate change holds a prominent place because of its impact on society. Mocatta (2015) explains that the stories covered by environmental journalism concern the impact humans have on the earth, but also how the environment can impact human life. Given this critical role, it is essential to understand how environmental journalists are adapting to and utilizing new media technologies, particularly social media platforms, to reach and engage their audiences effectively.

While a small percentage of journalists still resist incorporating social media into their work, it has become a normalized practice for many professionals. This widespread adoption raises intriguing questions about how journalists are integrating social media into their processes. This social media adoption by journalists raises important questions about their strategies and practices. How do journalists leverage social media to increase the reach of their stories? What

specific strategies, if any, do they employ to engage their audience? To what extent do journalists plan their social media content, as opposed to posting spontaneously? By exploring these questions, we can gain insight into how journalists, particularly environmental journalists, are adapting their professional practices to the social media landscape.

All these questions come from the idea that journalism is no longer only about a service to inform the population. The evolving landscape of journalism is not solely driven by technological changes, but also by shifting business priorities. Nielsen (2015) highlights this transformation, noting that in many news organizations, profit has become the primary motivation: "the primary aim of these companies has been to make a profit, not the kind of professional accomplishment or public interest goal that motivates many journalists" (p. 51). This shift in priorities creates a tension between journalistic ideals and business obligations, potentially influencing how journalists, including environmental reporters, approach their work on social media platforms.

The way people consume news also has an impact on this topic. According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center, half of U.S. adults get news at least sometimes from social media (Liedke & Wang, 2023). Because of that, journalists had to learn to adapt and incorporate these technologies into their work. Walters' (2021) study adds to this discussion by explaining that journalists started to pay more attention to social media logistics and started to use more strategies in the ways they were using the platforms, emphasizing algorithms and audience metrics. A review of the literature on journalists' social media use reveals a consensus regarding its promotional benefits. Johnson et al. (2019) explain that promotion is one of the most obvious ways journalists use Twitter to disseminate articles. While their study focused on Twitter, this

concept can be applied more broadly to social media. News organizations often ask their employees to share links to their stories online to increase traffic to the organization's website.

Similarly, Orellana-Rodriguez and Keane (2018) emphasize the self-promotion and personal branding opportunities that platforms like Twitter offer journalists. These findings underscore the dual role of social media in journalism: as both a tool for disseminating news and a means of building a journalist's professional profile. While this study aims to examine social media use broadly, Twitter serves as a valuable example due to its extensive coverage in journalism research across various time periods. Twitter is a popular social media among journalists because of its interactivity features and access to personalities quotes and statements (Broersma & Graham, 2013).

Regardless of the specific social media platform, journalistic practices are evolving, partly due to financial pressures. While journalism has always been a business, the focus has shifted over time. Although selling print newspapers remains important, the priority now is driving online traffic to news sites. The goal is to increase website visits, which in turn leads to more advertising revenue. This digital shift is seen as crucial for maintaining newsroom operations and financial stability in the modern media landscape. What results from this is the idea that journalism now is more attached to marketing principles, and journalists more often need to “sell” their work to the audience. Vos et al. (2023) argue that journalists now incorporate marketing strategies into their roles, focusing not only on reporting but also on audience engagement and retention. This shift indicates a significant transformation in journalistic practice, potentially influencing professional norms, routines, and role perceptions.

Role Theory addresses how people act in society, mostly being influenced by the way they think they should act (Anglin et al., 2022). Following that idea, journalist roles are

structures that shape different ways journalists usually conduct their work, normally from the perception of what is expected from them (Hanitzsch, 2018). Although some work has been done on environmental journalists' role conceptions, not much has been done to understand how these roles may influence how they do their work on social media, and that is what this study proposes to explore.

This theoretical framework is then important to understand how social media is possibly changing these roles for journalists, and the opposite, how maybe the roles they hold can influence how they act online. However, although research has already been done to understand journalists' role conceptions, not a lot of studies focus on looking specifically at the environmental field.

While research on journalists' role conceptions exists, few studies specifically address the environmental field. This study aims to fill that gap by examining environmental journalists' perspectives, particularly regarding new practices in their domain. The research will focus on these professionals' use of social media to enhance their work. Given the critical nature of environmental issues and their impact on society, studying the reporters who cover these crucial topics is both timely and relevant. Research on environmental journalism has revealed important insights into the professional practices and role conceptions of these specialized reporters. Figueroa (2017) found that environmental journalists' work is significantly influenced by their personal ideologies and beliefs, while still adhering to traditional journalistic norms such as objectivity and press freedom. This interplay between personal values and professional standards creates a unique dynamic in environmental reporting, often leading to unease when institutional requirements conflict with personal convictions.

Tandoc and Takahashi (2013) further revealed the role conceptions of environmental journalists, identifying the interpretive role as predominant. This aligns with the need to translate complex scientific information for a general audience, a key aspect of environmental reporting. Their study also highlighted the ongoing debate within the field regarding the advocacy role. While some environmental journalists strongly support advocating for environmental issues, others believe strict objectivity should be preserved. This tension reflects a broader, long-standing debate in journalism about the appropriateness of advocacy in reporting, particularly in specialized fields like environmental journalism. As the climate crisis intensifies, these role conceptions and the balance between interpretation, advocacy, and objectivity become increasingly critical in shaping public understanding and policy responses to global environmental challenges.

Looking at these examples, it is possible to see that the roles concepts framework was already explored in studies around environmental journalists, but one thing missing is the social media aspect in these discussions, and that is a gap this study intends to fill. The idea is that this aspect of how environmental journalists use social media can be related to the roles they perceive to have, and how these roles may influence and change how they act, for example, online.

This study plans to explore these ideas by performing in-depth interviews with environmental journalists. Given this study's theoretical framework and research objectives, in-depth interviews emerge as the most suitable methodological approach. Seidman (2006) underscores the value of interviews in qualitative research, noting that it allows researchers to probe into participants' experiences and explore how individuals construct meaning from these experiences. In the context of this study, interviews offer a unique opportunity to gain rich, nuanced insights into how environmental journalists perceive and utilize social media in their

professional practice. This method aligns closely with our aim to understand not just what journalists do on social media, but why they do it and how they interpret its role in their work.

Goals

While existing research has explored the role conceptions of environmental journalists and the general use of social media in journalism, there is a clear gap in our understanding of how these two areas intersect. Specifically, we know little about how environmental journalists' roles influence their social media practices. Given the increasing importance of social media in journalism and the crucial role environmental journalists play in informing the public about critical issues, this gap presents a significant research opportunity.

This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the relationship between environmental journalists' role conceptions and their social media use. Specifically, we will focus on two key roles identified in previous research: the interpretive role, which is widely accepted among environmental journalists, and the more controversial advocate role. By examining how these role conceptions shape social media practices, we can gain valuable insights into the evolving nature of environmental journalism in the digital age. This study will employ in-depth interviews with American environmental journalists, exploring their social media practices, motivations, possible roles, and how their online activities align with their professional objectives.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Role Theory

Role theory provides a valuable framework for examining how environmental journalists understand, interpret, and enact their professional responsibilities, particularly in the evolving digital landscape. Role is a concept that has been studied for many years and in many different fields of research because it is something that can influence how a person acts in society. At its core, role theory posits that individuals' behaviors are largely guided by their internalized understanding of the expectations and norms associated with their social positions (Biddle, 1986, as cited in Anglin et al., 2022). In journalism, these expectations emerge from professional socialization, organizational constraints, and broader societal expectations of what journalists should do and how they should behave. Anglin et al. (2022) explain that these roles can be behavior indicators if one knows what role is being portrayed and what expectations are attached to that role.

Role theory, therefore, is an interesting and suitable approach to look at how journalists are conducting their work and presenting themselves to society. It is also applicable to understand how much of what they do is influenced by how they think they should act, depending on roles conceptualized as 'right'. While role theory has been used for nearly four decades to explain behaviors, its application to journalistic practices, particularly in digital spaces like social media, remains relatively unexplored. This theoretical gap is particularly significant when considering how environmental journalists navigate their interpretive and advocacy roles in these new spaces. The theory's emphasis on how perceived expectations influence behavior makes it especially relevant for examining how environmental journalists

understand and enact their professional roles on social media platforms where traditional journalistic boundaries may blur.

Within the journalism field, a few studies have used the original definition of role theory in their research, such as Belz et al. (1989), who explored the perception of roles among journalists and public relations practitioners. However, as the field has evolved, scholars have increasingly adopted a more specialized framework of journalistic roles, though often without explicit connection to the broader theoretical underpinnings of role theory. While providing valuable insights into journalism-specific role conceptions, this shift has sometimes resulted in what Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) identify as theoretically thin analyses that tend toward description rather than explanation.

This study argues for integrating both frameworks – classic role theory and journalistic role conceptions – to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how environmental journalists navigate their professional roles on social media. Role theory's emphasis on the relationship between perceived expectations and behavior provides a robust theoretical foundation for examining how journalists understand their interpretive role. In contrast, the more specialized framework of journalistic roles offers insights into how these understandings translate into specific practices, particularly concerning advocacy.

The combination of these approaches is particularly relevant when examining environmental journalism, where the traditional journalistic tension between objectivity and advocacy is often heightened. As will be highlighted later in this chapter, environmental journalists must navigate complex role expectations that range from interpreting scientific information for public consumption to maintaining professional objectivity while covering issues with clear public interest implications. These professionals simultaneously face the challenge of

balancing traditional journalistic norms while managing the persistent tension between factual reporting, competitive business models for audience attention, and the perceived need for environmental advocacy. By applying role theory and journalistic role conceptions, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced theoretical understanding of how environmental journalists' role conceptions influence their social media practices. It also addresses the theoretical gap identified by Hanitzsch and Vos (2017).

Journalistic Roles and Role Conceptions

Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) describe journalistic roles as a construction of journalism's identity as an institution, and this means that these roles build the definitions of what is acceptable or not inside the institution, and what is appropriate or not for the profession. Hanitzsch (2018) adds to this by explaining that journalistic roles can be understood as structures of meaning, as a discourse, which will guide journalists in specific contexts on how they 'should' act. This institutional perspective shows how journalistic roles serve as collective mechanisms that maintain professional boundaries. In doing so, they help distinguish journalism from other forms of public communication in today's complex media landscape.

There are different concepts attached to the framework of journalistic roles, and although their definitions are not always consistent among different scholars, it is important to explore them. Mellado et al (2016) define the concepts as role conception (journalist's own formulation of roles), role perception (the expectations from society), role enactment (individual behavior), and role performance (outcome of decisions). Since they are all related to each other, it can be hard to focus on only one, but for this study, the focus will be mostly on role conception.

Different authors have defined different roles journalists attribute to themselves. For example, Christians et al. (2009) identified (as cited in Hanitzsch, 2018) four roles that

journalists adopt: the monitorial role, the facilitative role, the radical role, and the collaborative role. Weaver and Wilhoit, on the other hand (as cited in Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017), attributed journalists' roles as disseminators, interpreters, adversarial, and populist mobilizers.

Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) expanded the list of journalistic roles by adding cultural aspects that went beyond the Western framework. The authors were focused on how culture can influence journalistic work, and therefore, it would be unfair to understand the roles only by looking at one part of the world. They have one of the most comprehensive approaches to journalistic roles by considering culture and regional differences with 18 different categories, including the disseminator, monitor, detective, advocate, educator, and many other roles. Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, p. 6) explain that “the discourse of journalistic roles is the central arena where journalistic culture and identity is reproduced and contested; it is the place where the struggle over the preservation or transformation of journalism’s identity takes place” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 6).

The reality is that even though there are some ground norms for journalists, such as objectivity, the way they do their work depends on cultural aspects and different roles that will also be influenced by society’s cultural aspects. Charles (2019) agrees with this vision and states that journalists will perceive their work and social function in various ways depending on their culture, and that these role conceptions will help them to make sense of how they do their jobs.

Because of what the roles can say about a journalist and how they understand their responsibilities, this framework has been applied multiple times to studies around journalism, including different subfields such as political and sports journalism. Similarly, there has been some research on the roles of environmental journalists; however, this field can still benefit from understanding how specific roles may influence their work.

Environmental Journalism: Norms, Practices and Role Conceptions

Environmental journalists are focused on reporting on environmental-related issues such as climate change, air pollution, deforestation, and many other problems. Cox (2007) explains that environmental communication has been associated with being a crisis discipline because the topics and their connections with the public are often viewed as crises. Howarth (2013) also addresses that the subjects explored in environmental journalism are usually related to risks and are frequently a cause of debate.

Environmental journalism encompasses two interconnected narratives: humanity's impact on Earth and the reciprocal effects of environmental changes on human societies. While primarily examining human activities affecting the natural world (Mocatta, 2015), this field differs notably from general science communication. As Davis et al. (2018) observe, environmental journalism often takes a more critical stance, scrutinizing systemic issues and power structures that contribute to environmental degradation, rather than solely reporting scientific findings. Considering the size of coverage, environmental journalists can focus either on more regional problems or bigger ones on a larger scale, such as international issues. Mocatta (2015, p. 11) states that “environment stories can be as large-scale as global warming; they can be international, for example, one country’s pollution affecting its neighbor; or they can be entirely local in focus, for example, localized conflict over the site of a new water pipe or dam”.

Among the different reasons why it is important to address this field of journalism, one that can be highlighted is the importance of environmental discussion nowadays, with many topics that need to be brought to the public's attention. Robbins and Wheatley (2021) define the work that environmental reporters do as crucial in reporting climate change, and they go on to explain that this beat of journalism is becoming even more complex each day because of the

issues approached. From interviews with environmental journalists, the authors found that it is a common theme among professionals this understanding of the complexity of the field: “The technicalities of climate science, carbon markets and trading, new energy technology, climate policies, and environmental regulations mean environmental journalists must make sense of complicated information in short timeframes” (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021, p. 1296).

Another challenge that environmental journalists face is the difficulty of focusing on only this area of work, especially now when news organizations have budget cuts and journalists are required to multitask and do a little bit of everything, including marketing roles, as previously pointed out. Witsen and Takahashi (2018) defend in their study the need for knowledge-based journalism when it comes to environmental and science questions, referring to the idea that with this practice journalists would have to get informed on a much deeper level before reporting on scientific issues, which makes sense but also has many obstacles with the way news organizations are structured now.

Research by Robbins and Wheatley (2021) reveals that environmental journalists increasingly must cover multiple beats, as newsrooms reduce specialized positions in favor of generalist reporters to cut costs and conserve resources. This industry shift has led some environmental journalists to seek alternative platforms, with many migrating to specialized online outlets focused exclusively on environmental coverage (Painter et al., 2024). Another characteristic frequently explored in the literature about this type of journalism is its political nature. Some authors argue that discussions about the environment often lead to the development of policies that involve political decisions (Macotta, 2015). This political side also raises the discussion of how “political” environmental journalists need to be in their reporting and speech. The concept of objectivity, then, is challenged by any political preferences that environmental

journalists may have. However, this discussion around environmental journalists' objectivity is not something new but something explored for a while, and it also connects with the idea of role conceptions and how these professionals conceptualize their tasks.

Different factors influence role conceptions, such as a person's identities, social setting, and values (Singer, 2004). Research on journalists' role conceptions typically focuses less on how journalists understand their roles and more on comparing their perceived roles with their actual performance, seeking to identify alignments or discrepancies between these two aspects. For example, a study by Mellado and Dalen (2013) comparing journalists' roles with the stories they produced showed that there were gaps between their conceptions and their performances. Among the variables observed by the authors, they also found that this gap would increase even more if there were economic and political influences on the journalists, as well as the feeling of belonging to a beat (Mellado & Dalen, 2013).

Looking specifically at environmental journalists, the literature does not extensively cover their conception of roles, however, there are different studies focused on understanding their norms and practices, something valuable for this research. For example, a study by Bourassa et al. (2013) explored the best practices in environmental journalism. The authors conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis of the literature by reviewing 58 peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed articles about environmental journalists. After performing a thematic analysis of the data collected, the authors found that a large part of the literature examined claims that the traditional journalistic norms are inadequate for environmental reporting (Bourassa et al., 2013). Overall, the Bourassa et al. (2013) study results show that environmental journalism follows the same norms as other journalists. However, the authors argue that this needs to change, putting

the responsibility on educators and journalism training to figure out a better way to conduct this practice.

Likewise, Figueroa (2017) conducted in-depth interviews with environmental reporters to understand their practices and what influences their jobs. After 13 interviews, one of the main findings of this study was related to how their ideologies significantly influence the way environmental journalists conduct their work. Figueroa (2017) explains that some of the traditional norms, such as notions of objectivity, non-bias, and a free press, are also a part of the environmental journalism world, which is a similar finding from the study by Bourassa et al. (2013). The author identified from the interviews that environmental journalists are guided by their personal beliefs and ideologies and that these factors play an important role in their jobs (Figueroa, 2017). According to this study, environmental journalists' beliefs can also create frustration when they conflict with the work they must do in the institutional structure. Lastly, Figueroa (2017) recognized that their perceived identities and roles also influence how environmental journalists think they should conduct their work.

In their study of journalistic roles among environmental reporters, Tandoc and Takahashi (2013) surveyed 103 environmental journalists, asking them to rate their agreement with various role descriptions on a 5-point scale. Their findings revealed that environmental journalists most strongly identified with the interpretive role, likely due to the scientific nature of their coverage. This alignment reflects the need to translate complex scientific concepts into accessible information for general audiences. The study also found that the advocacy role generated significant debate among respondents, with responses showing high variance. While some journalists strongly supported environmental advocacy in their work, others firmly rejected this approach (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2013). The findings by Tandoc and Takahashi, along with the

long-time debate in the field, are reasons why this study proposes to focus on the advocacy and interpretive roles. The interpretive role can be associated with the idea of objectivity, where journalists analyze official claims, in this case related to environmental problems, and translate the information to a general audience. Journalists who identify with this role do not think they should have an opinion; they only interpret and translate the facts. Therefore, we can add even more to the literature discussion around advocacy and objectivity in this field by looking at these two specific roles and how they may influence environmental journalists' work online.

The Advocacy vs. Objectivity Debate in Environmental Journalism

Fahy (2018) argues that environmental journalists were the first to challenge the concept of objectivity, and one of the reasons for that is how many of them sympathize with the environmental cause. Charles (2019) explains that in opposition to objective journalism, there is advocacy journalism where specific political and social causes are promoted. For this type of reporting, journalists will go against the neutrality norm and actively try to promote social change. According to the author, although it is a controversial debate, there is the argument that advocacy is present in any kind of journalism; what will change is the amount of it and how it is presented (Charles, 2019). Even though the author addresses this discussion more broadly, it is much more present in the environmental field.

One of the concerns about this discussion is related to how much a journalist's perspectives are inserted into a story. The main idea is that journalism guided by objectivity will be value-free, without portraying the journalists' point of view. Fahy (2017) summarizes both concepts:

Objectivity is a broad term, but has been commonly interpreted to mean the reporting of news in an impartial and unbiased way by finding and verifying facts, reporting facts

accurately, separating facts from values, and giving two sides of an issue equal attention to make news reports balanced. Advocacy journalism, by contrast, presents news from a distinct point of view, a perspective that often aligns with a specific political ideology. It does not separate facts from values and is less concerned with presenting reports that are conventionally balanced (p. 1).

Bennett et al. (2022) suggest that environmental journalists may adopt advocacy positions to engage the public with environmental issues and promote positive change. Since many environmental problems originate from human activity, journalists often navigate a complex balance between objective reporting and raising public consciousness about environmental responsibility, particularly when reporting demands factual presentation and calls for societal action. Fahy (2018) also recognizes this conflict by clarifying that while many of these journalists sympathize with environmental values, they also want to be seen as professionals in their reporting, and that is why it is not easy to be categorized as advocates or not. Some authors will even state that being an advocate is not something that all environmental journalists do consciously because it is naturally interconnected with the environmental reporting style.

Mocatta (2015), for example, explains that because of the challenges faced by the beat, especially when it comes to polarized issues, it makes sense that journalists will try to “defend” their stories using an advocacy writing style. The author writes: “Environmental advocacy journalism may serve to some extent to counterbalance the (often anti-environmentalist/pro-business) voices of the powerful that are most often heard in the contemporary media” (Mocatta, 2015, p. 22). During interviews, environmental journalists denied the possibility of being activists for the cause, stating that they are not advocates, but journalists committed to reporting

scientific facts and evidence from studies, while also stating that credibility is something important to them (Robbins & Wheatley, 2021).

Although many journalists see this matter of advocacy and objectivity as black and white, others will argue that being advocates does not make them less journalists. Caceres (2019) explores advocacy journalism as a genre of the field where only one point of view is often presented, and comments that, in recent years, some scholars have stopped seeing advocacy and informing as opposing ideas. The author explains that both sides may not be as exclusive as previously studied, showcasing that many advocate journalists do not dismiss objectivity and adhere to professional norms (Caceres, 2019).

Based on the reviewed literature, some journalists resist identifying as advocates due to concerns that championing environmental causes might compromise their professional credibility and perceived objectivity. However, with social media, journalists have a place to share opinions, and these opinions could express their advocacy without them even noticing. According to Robbins and Wheatley (2021), environmental journalists face pressure from online communities to act as advocates on social media, defending environmental causes rather than simply reporting news. This pressure from digital audiences underscores the importance of examining journalists' motives, practices, and the external influences shaping their work.

Social Media Use by Journalists

For years now, many journalists have incorporated social media into their work, whether because their employers ask them to or maybe because they see how it can be helpful for them. Although journalists still use traditional media such as television and print newspapers, a couple of factors have made social media an important platform for the field. Weaver and Willnat (2016) surveyed over a thousand journalists, and amongst the findings, they recognized that

social media makes it possible to produce faster reporting and cover the news more quickly. The idea is that it is easier to publish breaking news with just a post online than to gather information and create a video for TV, for example. Some journalists recognize as a negative consequence that online journalism has sacrificed accuracy over speed but overall, they can see how social media can be beneficial for them (Weaver & Willnat, 2016).

Journalists can benefit from social media in many ways, such as by looking for sources, new story ideas, disseminating and promoting their new stories, and engaging with the public (Zhang & Li, 2020). Although this is a general view of social media use by journalists, different platforms may be used for different purposes depending on their affordances. Twitter, for example, is a platform well explored in journalism research across various periods due to its different affordances. Hedman and Djerf-Pierre (2017) studied the platform and defined the main categories of why journalists use Twitter: to perform research, network, and brand. Similarly, Broersma and Graham (2013) described that journalists use Twitter as a reporting tool, to promote their work, collect data, and gather sources that can be included in their news stories.

Johnson et al. (2019) explored this promotion concept by stating that news organizations often ask their journalists to share the links to their stories on the platform to increase the news website traffic. The idea is that more access to the links and the organization's website will lead to more advertising and more profit for maintaining the newsrooms. The study by Johnson et al. (2019) proposed to analyze the use of Twitter by 60 economic print journalists in Belgium to identify patterns and understand how they use the platform for different purposes. Among the findings, the authors identified that half of the posts from the journalists contained links to general websites and almost 30% of the posts on Twitter had a link that directed to their news organization's website (Johnson et al., 2019).

Vos et al. (2023) discussed this phenomenon by explaining that journalists incorporate marketing principles into their work routines to promote their content on social media. This new layer to their jobs comes mainly from the shift in the market with the advance of the internet and the need to adopt new practices to market the news. Tandoc and Vos (2015, p. 15) explained that “news organizations have long operated in a dual market system and as many organizations depended on advertising [...] But what is different now is that the individual journalist is feeling the pressure of participating in this market for audience clicks”. The authors conducted case studies of online newsrooms, followed by interviews, and they found that some newsrooms have an unspoken rule that using social media for promotion is part of the editor's and journalists' jobs and something required from them (Tandoc & Vos, 2015).

Molyneux and Mourão (2017) also explored journalists' practices online through a content analysis of political journalists' tweets and the results suggested that reporters tend to interact more with other reporters than with people from outside the journalism world (the public), and they would do that by commenting in each other's posts, sharing humor and retweeting the content. The authors explain that journalists are “frequently using retweets to promote their co-workers, quote tweets to comment on the work of their peers at other news organizations, and replying mostly to themselves” (Molyneux & Mourão, 2017, p. 261).

Journalistic Norms and Social Media Practices

Although it is important to explore how journalists are using social media in their work, it is also important to look at the implications of their practices for journalism norms. For example, engaging and interacting with the public and informally making conversation can be seen by some as something against the traditional norms and practices of journalism that require objectivity and impersonality. Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) understand journalistic norms as a set

of unspoken rules that guide journalism with formal and informal elements such as traditions, codes of conduct, and cultural consensus of how the work should be done. Mellado (2019) explains that some of these unspoken norms and practices include impartiality, verification, and gatekeeping.

However, these traditional norms are being challenged and shifting as journalists use more social media for their work. Lasorsa et al. (2012) address, for instance, that because of how social media is structured with their social norms of expressing opinions and personality, many journalists will use it to express their thoughts, and this is not what is recommended by the norm of journalism objectivity. However, the authors also explain that the practice, especially of journalists using Twitter, is becoming normalized to fit their professional norms and practices (Lasorsa et al., 2012). What results from this is a mix of social media and journalistic norms.

One of the main factors in this discussion is the idea that journalists are mixing personal and professional perspectives into one account on social media, therefore mixing the norms. However, it is also important to highlight that different journalists use social media differently. Bossio and Sacco (2017) explored in their study how different groups of journalists separate or integrate their personal and professional identities on social media. In summary, Bossio and Sacco (2017) found that:

Some journalists indicated that they represented aspects of both their personal and professional identities online through social media (the “social” identity), while others restricted public access to their personal expression online because they felt much more conflicted about what they presented to a social media audience (the “transitional” identity). Some journalists saw social media as a form of “personality branding” and their

presence on social media as part of a promotional strategy for both them and their media organization (the “branded” identity) (p. 540).

The authors used the framework of social identity, and it is possible to see how different journalists interact with social media and balance the personal and professional perspectives based on this factor. For this study, however, the focus is on different roles instead of identities. This study will also focus on how these normative ideas work in the environmental journalism beat. Although the change in journalistic norms is an ongoing process that has no specific starting point, some authors may attribute a certain responsibility to the style of microblogging on Twitter. Bentivegna and Marchetti (2017) state that this new setting was crucial to reinterpreting traditional journalism, shifting the rules and practices once established, a change that some may even call inevitable. It is interesting to think that as technology advances, it is normal to have changes in the field. However, the literature does not address whether the changes represent a positive or a negative shift for the journalism industry.

Summary, Purpose, and Research Questions

By looking at the different parts of the literature explored, it is possible to have a bigger picture of what is being studied around environmental journalism, and where there is room for more research to be developed. Role theory is a good foundation for understanding some factors that can influence journalists’ behavior. However, as the literature shows, even though they use similar concepts, journalists will use the framework of journalistic roles whenever they address roles. Considering this, combining these two frameworks will be crucial to exploring more environmental journalists’ roles, a field that deserves more attention.

Climate change, and so many other topics that environmental journalists cover, are important to the conservation of the Earth. Understanding how these professionals conduct their

work can be important to passing it on to future generations. It is also important to understand how they conceptualize their roles as environmental journalists, as this can change how they do their work. For this study, the goal is to understand how different role conceptions can influence environmental journalists' practices, with a focus on their work online.

Social media now plays an important part in journalistic work, either for marketing and promotion purposes or in other valuable ways. Therefore, the relationship between social media and environmental journalists can be more studied because of its presence in their daily tasks. The social media aspect also facilitates studying how journalistic norms are shifting with time, with the implementation of new technologies.

Since the perceived norms can influence journalistic work, it is also an important concept to look at, even more so because it can be directly related to different roles. The objectivity norm, for example, can be associated with the interpretive role. Therefore, if environmental journalists perceive this norm as inflexible, they may conceptualize this role more than others and work differently than a colleague who identifies with the advocate role. Because of the controversy between being an advocate and an objective (interpretive) in the field, these are the two roles this study will focus on. The goal is to try to understand how these two different roles may interfere with how environmental journalists use social media for their work. This study aims to fill the gap in environmental journalists' role conceptions and their social media use.

To fill this gap in the literature, this study proposes to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do environmental journalists perceive their interpretive role in relation to their use of social media for work?

RQ2: How do environmental journalists perceive their objective role in relation to their use of social media for work?

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

The constructivist paradigm acknowledges that reality is socially constructed, with multiple possible interpretations that are context-dependent, focusing on understanding meaning rather than discovering universal laws or causal explanations. The qualitative methodology of this study employs in-depth interviews to examine how environmental journalists understand their professional roles and social media practices through their own narratives. This approach values the richness of journalists' lived experiences and the meanings they construct around their work, allowing patterns to emerge naturally through systematic analysis of interview transcripts. Traditional positivist terminology such as independent/dependent variables and measurement frameworks are not applicable to this constructivist research paradigm, which seeks to understand complex social phenomena through participants' own interpretations and contexts. While the analysis will identify relationships between role conceptions and social media practices, these emerge as interrelated themes rather than as discrete measurable variables.

Theoretical Framework of the Method

For this study, we used a qualitative phenomenological research design that focuses on journalists' experiences with the phenomenon of social media. Bliss (2016) explains that phenomenological research is an investigation of humans' experiences to learn their common understandings and meanings. To learn more about environmental journalists' experiences, we conducted interviews. According to Seidman (2006), the author highlights how important interviewing is in exploring the context of people's behavior, and by doing so, you can also explore the meaning behind those behaviors and understand the actions of the interviewees. In

this case, this study wanted to understand the actions of environmental journalists online, their behaviors, and the meaning and motivations behind those.

Alamri (2019) also states how interviews can be beneficial for research. They allow researchers to explore the interviewee's thoughts, feelings, and opinions and to explore with follow-up questions that allow more clarification or a different perspective on the issue, especially if it's a semi-structured interview. According to Alamri (2019, p. 66), "Interviewing provides an opportunity to explain or clarify questions or answers, thereby helping to increase the accuracy of the collected data."

The semi-structured interview was the best option for this study, given the different types of interviews used in qualitative research. According to Wilson (2012), the different interview styles are classified as structured, semi-structured, and unstructured, with all of them having their qualities and disadvantages. However, with the semi-structured approach, there was more flexibility, which was helpful in a study like this, where there is a gap in environmental journalists' research, and not a lot is known about their habits. Although the semi-structured approach still has a list of questions written before the interview as a starting point, the researcher has the flexibility to come up with more questions as the interview develops (Wilson, 2012).

Sample and Recruitment

Besides the type of interview used, population sampling is another important thing to pay attention to. For this study, purposive sampling was used, where the participants were chosen because they have specific characteristics instead of random selection (Wimmer & Domminick, 2014). This type of sampling allows the study to focus on a specific kind of participant who is relevant to the study, which in this case would be an environmental journalist.

For the sample, the environmental journalists were recruited directly from a specific organization called the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ), an institution that promotes stories around environmental issues and builds a community among these professionals. With a student membership, which only costs 25 dollars a year, it was possible to access the members-only listservs. A recruitment letter was sent to all environmental journalists who are part of the organization through this listserv or mailing list. The content of the message was a brief explanation of the study and a call for volunteers who could be interviewed. To participate in the study, the journalists were required to have at least 2 years of experience in the environmental journalism field, as well as to be journalists in the United States of America. Additionally, the Society of Environmental Journalists has its own guidelines about who can become a member, excluding public relations professionals or those who are lobbying on environmental issues, which probably excludes those working for biased outlets. There is trust that all members of the SEJ are in fact journalists with the right educational background and therefore suitable for participating in this study.

According to Wimmer and Domminick (2014), one of the advantages of a purposive sample is that it can be used to explore a specific medium. The specific medium for this research was social media, meaning that one criterion for participating in this study, besides being an environmental journalist, was to use social media for their work at least at some level. On the other hand, one disadvantage highlighted by the authors is that it does not fully represent the general population. However, since one of the goals is to identify patterns in this group of journalists, a generalization of the results for the whole class of professionals is not intended.

Additionally, a few journalists were selected to participate through snowball sampling. In the snowball sampling, the participants are selected based on recommendations from other

participants, and it works as a networking chain until the research has the desired number of subjects (Naderifar et al., 2017). Each environmental journalist was asked for recommendations, which resulted in a couple more participants for the study.

As for the number of interviews, this is always a difficult question regarding the amount of data in qualitative research. The goal was to perform 8-10 interviews with environmental journalists. There are two ways, as indicated by Seidman (2006), to determine the sample size: sufficiency and saturation of information. Sufficiency is associated with the number of people to “represent” the group. Saturation happens when the interviewer starts to hear the same information from the participants repeatedly, getting more of the same results, without new information.

Looking at the literature, a sample size of 10 participants would have been ideal, considering past research with similar purposes. For example, a study conducted by Brems et al. (2017) performed semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 journalists. Parmelee (2013) also used interviews as the study method and conducted 11 interviews with political journalists. Both studies were similar in exploring journalists and social media, something that aligns with this research goal. Brems et al. (2017) explored journalists’ Twitter behaviors, and the interviews were used to understand the reasons behind the social media behavior. Similarly, Parmelee (2013) interviewed political journalists who used the platform Twitter to understand how it can influence their professional routines. These studies are a good reference to guide this research since I am interested in understanding environmental journalists’ behavior, routines, and roles on social media.

Following previous studies, the best estimated time for the interviews was a maximum of one hour, so there is time to cover all the aspects, and it is not too time-consuming for the

participants. Brems et al. (2017) took a little more time with their face-to-face interviews and performed them in 40 to two hours, but Parmelee (2013) relied on 30 to 60 minutes of interviews.

The number of questions prepared influences time spent. For this study, we planned to ask twelve core questions. Robson (2011, as cited by Alsaawi, 2014) provides some advice when writing and preparing the questions. First, it is important not to ask long or multiple questions at once, since this can hinder the participant's understanding. Second, it is encouraged not to use jargon or ask questions that, in a certain way, can lead the interviewee to an answer. Lastly, the interviewer must be careful to avoid biased questions and be as neutral as possible (Robson, 2011, as cited in Alsaawi, 2014). To understand if the proposed questions work as intended, we conducted a pilot interview with an environmental journalist before the other interviews. The pilot worked as a way to practice the questions with someone from the target group and make any adjustments to improve the data.

With the advancement of technology, interviews can now be conducted with people from all around the world without losing their essence. Considering this, the interviews for this research were conducted online, over video calls on the platform Teams. Wimmer and Domminick (2014) highlight, as one of the advantages of personal interviews, the ability to be face-to-face with the interviewee and observe other types of information, such as body language. Although it is not the same, and it may feel better to perform an interview in person, video-chatting interviews also work by the same rule because you can see the interviewee and connect with them similarly to in-person interviews.

Two of Brems et al.'s (2017) interviews were conducted on Skype, which did not affect their results. Also, one advantage of online interviews is that the participants have more

availability because they can schedule the interview and participate from wherever they are in the world. Through online video-chatting, there are more time windows to do the interviews, and if one of the participants needs to reschedule, it is easier than in-person interviews.

Data Collection Procedures

The first step in collecting data for this study was to submit a research proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) detailing the recruitment materials and methods that will be used to ensure all ethical procedures are followed. After IRB approval (listed in Appendix C), the first recruitment email was sent to environmental journalists, members of SEJ.

The complete recruitment materials can be found in Appendix B, but in summary, the recruitment letter included:

1. An introduction to the research and the researcher.
2. Information on what is being asked of the participant (1 hour of interview).
3. Where and how the interviews will be conducted (Over Teams).
4. A call for participation.
5. Information for contact if willing to participate or additional questions.

With the participants selected, interviews were conducted between January and March of 2025, considering the best time for the subjects. All meetings were held over the platform Teams, and with the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded for further analysis.

The interviews started with demographics and simple questions approaching participants' characteristics, where they live, how long they have been working as environmental journalists, whether they are freelancers or attached to any news media organization, whether they use social media, and if so, which ones. After the initial check, the participants were asked around 8 questions based on the literature review. Guided by Role Theory, the interview questions were

designed to explore how journalists perceive their roles in the context of societal expectations, professional ethics, and organizational pressures. Meanwhile, Journalistic Roles informed questions regarding specific professional roles such as interpreter and advocate. The full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A. Since the interviews will follow a semi-structured format, if needed, there were follow-up and additional questions based on the participants' answers. Some specific probes are provided as samples, but more generic follow-up questions were added as needed for richness and greater clarity, such as "could you explain what you mean by....?" or "could you tell me a little more about...?"

All interviews were recorded through the platform Teams, where the meetings took place. This platform was chosen because of its accessibility since you do not have to pay to record long meetings. The platform also generated and provided the transcripts, which were helpful since the data was collected in only one place. Since sometimes this technology is not completely precise, after the interviews, I cleaned up the transcripts and fix any errors present. With the recording, it was also possible to go back and check what was said to improve the quality of the transcripts. Also, for more accurate data, I took detailed notes throughout the interviews, including notes of non-verbal cues or tone from the participant. When re-watching the interviews, the goal was to amend my personal notes to the transcript to have a complete representation of the meeting, and therefore valuable data to analyze. After the data was collected, it was time to start the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

An important part of the process is the data analysis, which was a thematic analysis. Braun and Clark (2017, p. 297) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data". This method of

analyzing the data is useful because it can help to identify patterns in the participants' responses and, from that, interpret the data to find the answer to the research questions. Rather than operationalizing predetermined constructs, thematic analysis allows themes to emerge organically from the data. The focus is on identifying patterns of meaning across participants' lived experiences. While it begins with concepts from the literature, the final themes are developed through iterative coding and analysis of the interview transcripts.

The data analysis, similar to the process of formulating the interview guide, was driven by the framework of Role Theory and Journalistic Roles. Understanding the ideas of both theories made it possible to obtain themes from the data more effectively. Role Theory, for example, guided the data analysis with the comprehension that journalists' conceptions are also influenced by their understanding of society's expectations. The analysis process was easier with the theory's concepts. Additionally, drawing on Journalistic Roles, we used thematic analysis to examine qualitative responses, identifying common themes related to the journalistic roles in focus.

According to Braun and Clark (2006), there are six steps to conducting a thematic analysis: familiarization with data, generation of codes, combining codes into themes, reviewing themes, determining the significance of themes, and reporting of findings. First, it is time to read the interviews to familiarize yourself with the data and then generate the codes.

Coding is an important part of the process and needs to be done carefully. For this study, the software Taguette was used to assist in organizing the coding process; it does not have any automated qualitative analytical features. With the different themes discovered, it was possible to analyze and review them as needed. About the difference between codes and themes, Braun and Clark (2017, p. 297) explain: "Codes are the smallest units of analysis [...] the building blocks

for themes, (larger) patterns of meaning, underpinned by a central organizing concept - a shared core idea. In my analysis, these codes and themes serve functions analogous to operationalized constructs in quantitative work, but emerge inductively from the data rather than being predetermined. The multiple levels of analysis in thematic analysis (semantic and latent) provide the depth that quantitative researchers might seek through different levels of measurement. Through careful application of this systematic analytical process, it was possible to derive meaningful insights about journalists' role conceptions and social media use that maintain methodological integrity while honoring the rich complexity of qualitative data.

It is also important to highlight that the interview guide was crafted thinking of analytical questions focusing on uncovering patterns, themes, and meanings within the text, which made it easier to understand the meaning within the answers. Having the interviews recorded was also a starting point to make sure that the analysis is going to be credible since the data can be revisited at any moment. To also ensure that the analysis was done properly, I was consistent when looking at the data and created a codebook to help keep consistency. As a researcher, I understand that sometimes we can be influenced by personal bias, and I made sure to critically reflect on my decisions and analysis, so the study was not affected by prior conceptions. Lastly, as expected with thematic analysis, the data was in constant review to ensure the findings are correct and aligned with reality.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The primary aim of this study is to understand more about the relationship between environmental journalists and their use of social media. Throughout fourteen interviews, it was possible to observe some consistent themes and patterns amongst the environmental journalists' answers. In this chapter, the data will be organized to present the main themes found within the interviews concerning social media use, as well as some interesting findings that may play a part in the discussion around this topic.

Participants

As discussed in Chapter 3, the participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Of the fourteen participants who made these findings possible, six were women and eight were men. Another demographic to highlight is their level of experience in the journalism field. Half of the interviewees had at least twenty years of experience covering environmental-related issues, while the other half had no more than fifteen years working in the field. To protect the participants' confidentiality, they were assigned pseudonyms, and no identifiable information will be revealed in the findings. A summary of participants' pseudonyms and years of experience can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Participants

Participants' name	Years of experience in the field
Adria	10 years
Anthony	5 years
Naomi	5 years
Michael	Over 30 years (retired)

Julie	30 years
Adam	30 years
Liam	15 years
Heather	7 years
Jessica	40 years
Mary	3 years
Chris	35 years
Brian	30 years
Bradley	15 years
Barry	24 years

As a reminder, the research questions were:

RQ1: How do environmental journalists perceive their interpretive role in relation to their use of social media for work?

RQ2: How do environmental journalists perceive their advocacy role in relation to their use of social media for work?

The participants answered twelve questions during the interviews to answer the proposed research questions. In addition, using the flexibility of semi-structured interviews, some additional questions were asked for further explanation. Before trying to explicitly answer the research questions on how environmental journalists perceive their interpretive and advocacy role regarding their use of social media, it is important to highlight some of the challenges.

As explored in the literature review, there is a certain debate around whether environmental journalists are naturally advocates for the environmental cause or not, with some

journalists defending this view and others stating that they should always be objective, only interpreters of scientific facts. Following that idea, during the interviews, it was possible to observe that the interpretive and advocate roles did not always exclude each other. However, it rather often merged into the opinions and thoughts of environmental journalists. This concept was portrayed differently throughout the interviews, which will be addressed later in this chapter. However, it is possible to see nuances of this phenomenon in the first big theme found regarding environmental journalists wanting to share opinions online but being cautious about acting on them.

Fear of Losing Credibility

Something seen across different interviews was the idea that portraying personal opinions on social media could result in a loss of credibility and consequently bring other repercussions to environmental journalists. In most cases, the journalists would affirm having personal opinions on some subjects, however, they would be very conscious about what they choose to put online. One of the interviewees, Jessica, reflected on this idea by stating that:

“I don't think you should be putting opinions out there. My opinions are mine, and they don't really matter to anyone outside my household. I can have opinions. I do have very strong opinions. So yes, I am very strongly opinionated, but they are my opinions, and I don't want them to color how people see the journalism that I and my organization provide.”

It is possible to see that initially Jessica has a very objective view of her role as an environmental journalist. However, one thing to pay attention to is that the idea of not being an advocate is attached to a “reason”, meaning that it can be more than her role affecting her decisions online, but also outside factors such as possible consequences to her words on social

media. As we can see from her quote, one of her concerns is that her opinions, if put out on the social media realm, could change people's perceptions of her work. This idea relates to credibility and how a journalist's opinions can be perceived as biased, affecting their credibility.

Naomi, another interviewee, contributes to this theme by stating that:

“I don't mind if a journalist is taking a little bit of activist mode and trying to preach a story, taking a stronger stand on behalf of their stories on social media. I personally don't mind that, but however, that's not the approach that I personally follow [...] I don't want any person, any organization, it can be right, left, center, to question my integrity and my bias.”

A journalist's credibility is important to them, but more than that, they are worried about possible outcomes that are attached to losing their credibility because of personal opinions online. Amongst the concerns, one mentioned by a few participants was not being able to get sources for their stories. For example, Naomi mentioned that in her job, she often has to talk to ranchers for her stories. She expressed concern that sharing a personal opinion online could lead them to make assumptions about her views, which might deter them from wanting to speak with her if their views differ. Julie also has a similar point of view regarding being careful about her opinions online. She prefers to retain any personal perspectives on social media because of the way some sources can react to it, even refusing to participate in a story. She explains that just for being an environmental journalist, people have preconceptions about them and may choose not to talk to them:

“I can't understand how I can take an opinion and then have me call a source and have them believe that I'm going to hear them out if their opinion is different than mine [...] And I've had disagreements with people about this. I've had oil and gas sources tell me

they won't talk to me because they think it's a point of view [climate change]. So that's a good example of why you have to be really careful.”

Another concern that came up amongst the participants during the interviews was related not only to the sources but also to how news organizations would perceive them. Mary, one of the study's participants, has been a freelancer for a couple of years, and she talks about how sharing personal opinions online could interfere with her chances of getting a job in a news organization. She explores this balance between objectivity and advocacy by stating that:

“I have been trying to maintain some level of objectivity, but only because I'm trying to keep that door cracked open of getting hired at a newsroom that values that... I'm trying to navigate spaces where you can't say the things and there are consequences and there is some relationship building that you are only going to be able to do and some bridges that you're only going to be able to cross if you're willing to be a little quiet.”

Unlike Jessica, Mary's role revolves more around advocacy. Throughout the interview, she shows that she is more involved with promoting the environmental cause to provoke changes in the audience. However, both of them are similar in their understanding that in this field, there is a need to put some boundaries when it comes to social media and portraying personal opinions.

Still under this big theme of fear of repercussions, some safety factors influence environmental journalists' use of social media. Although a lot of the participants did not touch this piece, some of them highlighted the insecurity that comes from sharing personal opinions and possibly getting backlash for that. Julie explored this dynamic by also explaining her role as a mother and how she will not post something online, not just for her safety, but also for her children:

“I don't love social media [as a mom and not really as a journalist]. I hate how it can also lead to doxing, which is really awful and really scary. And that's used as a weapon, right? And as a threat against journalists, we get direct messages that say, someone's going to target us. I worry about that. Not that much because I don't put myself out there on purpose. I think if I didn't have kids, I would be bolder because then it's just me, right? And I can take care of myself, for the most part, I don't put myself in risky situations, which is part of the reason why I don't put myself out there. Because I don't want to make myself a target.”

Some participants were more explicit about their fears than others. It showed up across different interviews and became a big theme amongst environmental journalists. Part of this discussion also brings a lot of political discourse, which will be touched on later in this chapter. It is interesting to point out that being cautious with social media sharing was not seen a lot in the literature review. However, it is something that exists in this field according to the findings of this study. Another important thing to highlight about this finding is that even with the challenges of classifying environmental journalists as interpreters and advocates, this was a theme present on both sides. In summary, both roles of interpreter and advocate understand that you should proceed with caution when sharing personal opinions on social media because of possible repercussions, and they will often choose not to post something personal to avoid problems.

Looking at Role Theory, this finding reaffirms the idea that people will try to adapt to society's expectations. There are different reasons why environmental journalists choose to abstain from sharing personal opinions online. However, it could also be understood that possible retaliation can come from not performing as expected. The journalistic norms,

approached in the literature, are therefore important to understand what society's expectations towards journalists are.

While some environmental journalists expressed having opinions but choosing not to share them online as a way to be careful, others were affirmative about their role as interpreters and how there is no room for opinion in this field, especially online.

Only Facts on Social Media

Contrary to those who wish to express personal opinions online but choose not to because of fear or repercussions, some of the participants only believe in sharing facts online. While less prevalent, another theme emerging from the interviews concerns journalists who strictly adhere to traditional norms by maintaining social media as a space exclusively for facts rather than opinions. Notably, several journalists expressing this perspective are veterans in the field, some proudly identifying as "old school." This suggests that commitment to journalistic conventions on social media platforms doesn't necessarily correspond with age, though this relationship merits consideration. Brian, a journalist for over 30 years, talked about how some things are changing in the field:

“It seems like some environmental journalists are more opinionated and express their opinions now than I would have expected 15 years ago. I mean, but the characteristic of environmental journalism has changed quite a bit. You don't have as many mainstream hard news environmental journalists anymore. And there are more freelancers and bloggers, and people with emerging or niche media, and so you end up with people who seem to want to express their opinion quite a bit. So what environmental journalism has become has sort of left me in the old school.”

While choosing not to express any opinions online, many of the study participants affirmed that they would not judge journalists who decide to do so. However, they would defend their position that there is usually no space for personal stands in this beat. Along with that, the idea of transparency was something explored amongst journalists more inclined to the interpreter role. They would often highlight the importance of being clear with the audience about where a journalist's opinion would start and end, making a clear separation from the news story that was produced based only on scientific facts. Adam clearly illustrates this vision by stating that:

“I think generically, a journalist must be objective. If their mission is to render an opinion, that's fine, but then that needs to be known. So, I think the default approach for a journalist must be objective. Any opinion that's expressed should be the result of the research they've done. They can write an opinion piece, people do that all the time, as long as it's known to be one [...] As long as you disclose that's what you're doing there's nothing wrong with it.”

Going back to journalistic norms, many participants aligned with the interpreter role do not consider social media as a place exempt from the traditional norms. They consider that, as environmental journalists, they should not put their voices in stories, and this also applies to the online world. Julie, another journalist in this beat for decades, shares this view of how to use social media for their work:

“I am definitely not one of those journalists. I don't post anything but my stories and part of that is because ethically, I don't see how I can post anything but my stories, or if I sometimes have found I'm on a big breaking news story and editors want me to post from the field I will, but it'll just be facts”

This finding adds to the Journalistic Roles framework by confirming that a journalist's roles conception can influence how they see their work. Journalists who embrace the interpretive role predominantly champion objectivity as their guiding principle for both reporting and online conduct. However, throughout many interviews, this concept of objectivity faced significant scrutiny. This is a debate that has long existed within journalism broadly but takes on particular significance in environmental reporting.

Objectivity as a Myth

An additional significant theme emerged from the research that, while not directly addressed by the initial research questions, warrants examination due to its recurrence across multiple interviews. In recent years, the traditional journalistic concept of objectivity has faced considerable scrutiny, a phenomenon clearly reflected in participants' responses. This finding does not suggest environmental journalists have become less objective in their reporting practices; rather, it indicates they have developed heightened awareness regarding their preconceptions about environmental topics and related discourse.

Numerous environmental journalists interviewed addressed this subject briefly, offering reflections on their understanding of bias and objectivity within their specialized field. A perspective that surfaced repeatedly emphasized that environmental journalists are fundamentally human before assuming their professional role, making it unreasonable to expect complete detachment from personal opinions and perspectives in their reporting work.

Notably, participants articulated this theme through two distinct approaches. The first group acknowledged the impossibility of absolute objectivity, recognizing that even fundamental journalistic decisions—story selection, problem framing, and image choice—represent personal judgments that reveal aspects of their perspective. While acknowledging these inherent

limitations, these journalists emphasized their commitment to preventing such personal choices from creating an appearance of undue bias in their work. Brian talks about this balance of maintaining objectivity and recognizing that even what he decides to write about can represent his values. He states that:

“I try very hard to be objective, but you know the choices I make about what to cover or just merely the fact that I've said ‘I'm an environmental journalist’ already increasingly ‘colors’ me in the opinion of others. So, if I decide that I want to cover those issues more, does that make me less objective? I don't know. I'm trying to do it in an objective and fair way. You know, that's a there's a lot of journalists that don't like the word objectivity. And I disagree with them.”

Julie also expresses her opinion about objectivity being a myth in the field: “I know people say there's no such thing as objectivity. And yes, that is a thing, right? Everybody's going to portray a story from their life experience, but you know, in the public domain, you either take an opinion or you don't. It's either a fact or not.”

The second group, however, takes a more progressive approach to seeing this and does not try to hide their perspectives from the audience. Anthony, a younger journalist, fits more in this second group and explains his perspective by stating that:

“I think my generation of journalists is certainly maybe redefining how we think of objectivity. I think a lot of journalists maybe woke up to the idea that maintaining objectivity in the traditional sense maybe is upholding institutions that they don't, as a human agree with. So, I think there's definitely been a shift maybe since then. I really don't see any issue with redefining objectivity. I think people want journalists to be human, to have basic ideals.”

This quote represents this idea of being transparent with the audience, which was briefly touched on but is important to highlight again. Between the interpretive and advocate roles, many environmental journalists believe that if you are to take clearer stands, you need to be clear with your audience. Of course, since those aligned with the interpretive role try not to share their perspectives, they consider that the audience does not need to know precisely where they stand. However, for environmental journalists, this discussion can get more complicated because some may say that they are already showing their positionality just for covering environmental issues. This was a very polarized opinion throughout the interviews.

While some participants showed that choosing environmental reporting was a big part of themselves and how that could say a lot about their beliefs, others were more “flexible” in understanding this beat, just as any other beat. Adria explores both sides of this discussion in her reflection. She explores her understanding that you would only usually write about environmental issues if you cared about them. However, she also exposes how this idea of caring and consequently not being completely objective is more heavily connected to this beat than others.

“I always say I am biased in favor of climate action. I think climate change is real and happening, and we need to do something about it. [...] It's impossible to write about a topic and not care about it. It's just unique that nobody looks at healthcare, journalists and says you're advocates for healthy people. Yeah, all right, that's sort of part of the job here. Environmental journalists, I think, have always gotten slammed with that a little harder because the policy prescriptions can be dramatic and It's just become so much more political and I think that's something that people really need to reckon with as our beat and our industry is going to have a lot more politics in it.”

The participant, Michael, also expresses a similar perspective when confronted with the idea that, because environmental journalists care deeply about the cause, they would be less objective in their words and reporting. Michael compares the environmental reporter with a criminal one, explaining that if the criminal reporter states that crime is bad, no one would question or say that they are being advocates for something. Other participants did a similar analogy with other beats, demonstrating that this discussion is more heavily concentrated in the environmental field. As mentioned before, caring about the environment could be seen as a way of not being completely objective and even advocates; however, some journalists question this view and state that caring does not mean advocacy.

The discussion of advocacy within environmental journalism, as presented in the literature review, has been happening for a long time in the field. One thing to be pointed out is the flexibility of how journalists would define the term. Throughout the interviews, it was possible to notice that the participants were thinking about advocacy differently than presented in the literature. Considering that, a question asking their view of the topic was added towards the end of the interview to understand the meanings they associate with advocacy.

Advocacy as a Call for Action

This theme represents a noteworthy finding from the collected data, one that does not entirely align with the existing literature on the subject. As examined throughout this project, the term "advocacy" permits various interpretations depending on context and individual perspective. For this study, many environmental journalists interviewed conceptualize advocacy as extending significantly beyond merely covering environmental issues and demonstrating concern for them. The distinction these journalists draw reveals a more nuanced understanding of advocacy within environmental journalism, one that differentiates between professional interest

in environmental topics and explicit calls for specific actions or policy changes. Their perspective suggests that authentic advocacy requires a more deliberate stance that moves beyond standard reporting practices into the realm of active engagement with environmental solutions.

Within the answers, some participants understood that advocacy can mean a very explicit call for action towards the audience. Mary, for example, explains that in her conception, being an advocate is more than just sharing an opinion online about environmental issues, but rather it is about having a goal to get the audience to do something. She states:

“I think just having an opinion on Instagram, I understand how you would think how that would go in the advocacy bucket, but to me, that's an opinion. If it's advocacy, there should be some kind of like really clear, measurable change that you are like trying to affect in the world, rather than just being mad about something, there should be a goal.”

To explain what could be defined as a “measurable change,” the participant cites a couple of actions that actual advocates are doing online, such as fundraising and telling people to call their congressperson for something specific. Mary also understands that the message's intention can be part of the advocacy discussion. She explains how whenever she posts something on her personal Instagram related to environmental issues, it is not to influence someone but rather just sharing her frustrations about something: “I think I'm mostly just letting off steam in terms of the things I'm posting, like I will repost memes or whatever”.

During the interviews, other participants also addressed this idea of considering advocacy as a call for action. Chris, for example, explains that he understands advocacy when journalists try to convince their audience to have certain behaviors. He states:

“Advocacy would mean either trying to persuade a decision maker, trying to persuade somebody who would be a distributor maker campaigning, donating money to a political campaign, or even an environmental cause.”

Throughout the interviews, it was possible to notice how the political discourse can be intertwined with the field of environmental journalism. In fact, for some of the participants, the call for action in advocacy is closely related to telling people who to vote for, which policies they should support, and encouraging the audience to “call out” on politicians. Adria portrays this idea very well in her definition of the concept. She states that: “Advocacy is pushing for one specific policy or candidate. I think if you're picking one policy above the rest or you're picking one candidate above the rest, that's straight up advocacy”. The participant also explained that simply stating something is bad, such as flooding, and that some change needs to be made, is not exactly advocacy.

Advocacy as Portraying Only One Side

Along with the theme of viewing advocacy as a call for action, many of the participants also understand the term as a way to showcase only one side of the story. The understanding among the participants with this perspective is that environmental journalists who are also advocates would only represent one side of the environmental discussion in their stories and consequently online. Liam, for example, understands that a journalist is an advocate when presenting only one solution to an issue.

“Usually, as an advocate, you are coming to the table with a very distinct point of view, and you are coming with a suite of potential solutions, and you are advocating for a particular solution to a problem, and saying, like this is the way to fix this particular

problem or whatever. You can still do solutions-focused journalism, but there is a line between doing journalism about solutions and advocating for a particular solution.”

Julie understands something very similar to this idea. In her effort to be as objective as possible, she explains how she always tries to make sure that everyone's point of view is represented in her stories. Again, she does not want to be seen as favoring one side more than another, be seen as an advocate, and consequently lose her credibility. Most participants do not want to be associated with favoring one of the sides they cover. Jessica even sees this going beyond support in the news stories or online. Related to the fundraising aspect, Jessica understands that even giving money to specific organizations can be seen as a way of advocacy. She states that: “I will not give money to an environmental organization because I don't want to be seen as financing a particular side of anything, even if I strongly believe in what they're doing, I think it's wrong”.

To conclude our analysis of how participants conceptualize advocacy, it is worth noting several less frequent but illuminating perspectives that further clarify how some environmental journalists interpret this term. These minority viewpoints, while not representative of the broader sample, offer valuable nuance to our understanding of advocacy's complex meaning within this professional community. Bradley, for example, touched on something that directly relates to the idea of objectivity being a myth in this beat. He understands advocacy as more flexible, even considering that any environmental journalist can advocate in certain scenarios. He states:

“I would say there is different advocacy on the spectrum. So, I think all journalism is a form of advocacy, unless you're just repeating the statements of people in power. It's a form of advocacy because we make decisions about what to cover and what not to cover. And by deciding to cover something, you are advocating that it is important. And then on

the other end of the spectrum is saying this is how we should do something, and this is the course of action we should take. And all of that can be backed up by informed opinion.”

It is possible to see that this quote refers to the previous idea that just by choosing to cover a specific issue, especially in the environmental beat, that could be considered some type of advocacy. At the same time, a more explicit advocacy would be a call for action, telling the audience exactly what they should do to help with the environmental cause. Bradley was not the only participant considering environmental journalism as something naturally inclined to advocacy. A couple of other participants clearly stated this idea. Naomi, for example, did a long reflection on this topic:

“I feel like every journalist work is an advocacy because of course, in the beginning I might have to cover many things that I do not have any feeling or emotion about, but the fact that I chose environment climate change as a subject that was a very much advocacy stand on my behalf because I grew up in a climate and environment, vulnerable geography, and I personally was environmentally conscious [...] I could have been an activist myself if I wanted to. But I chose the path of journalism to address it. I am probably doing a more invisible, subtle advocacy. That's how I feel. Probably not all journalists believe they do advocacy. But I think in one way or another, you are doing advocacy for something [...] So I think journalism is not a job that you separate from advocacy, you're advocating for something. Either we were doing it knowingly or unknowingly.”

Naomi concludes this reflection by noting that journalists face a pivotal choice about whether to vocalize their advocacy, a path she declined to follow for reasons previously

discussed in these findings. Heather expresses a comparable perspective, indicating she maintains restraint regarding her online commentaries and opinions. She believes that all journalism is some form of advocacy, mainly because there is a specific purpose. For the environmental beat, she explains that the purpose is “in some ways, sway how people are thinking about something by providing them information.”

Analysis reveals that despite some convergent perspectives enabling thematic categorization, participants exhibit diverse viewpoints, particularly regarding advocacy in environmental journalism. Moving beyond this dichotomy, we must examine how these journalists utilize social media professionally and how such usage potentially relates to their journalistic roles. The following sections explore key patterns and themes in social media usage among environmental journalists that emerged during data collection.

Social Media as a Useful Tool

One of the first themes around social media use among environmental journalists was how beneficial social media was for their work. Although on many different levels, many participants talked about how social media is, or at some point, a good tool for the journalist's work. This theme came across many of the participants, whether they were more inclined to the interpretive or the advocate roles. Following what was explored during the literature review, the participants would use social media to monitor news and sources, to do some networking, and to promote their stories. Anthony talks about how being online helps with his work:

“I think for me, maybe more than some of the other people you may have interviewed, it is definitely a big part of my reporting process. Social media helps me track what other outlets are doing, whether that's here locally or some of the bigger national outlets that cover my beat. I think it also helps us build community as journalists.”

Adria also addresses this use of social media to monitor news and possible story ideas:

“I’m on social media all the time. I check Twitter many times a day. I’m on Instagram a lot. I generally view Twitter as more of my professional space [...] I don’t do a lot; I scroll way more than I post. I keep an eye on the for you page now. I might cover hurricanes and the lead hurricane recorder for the paper, and Twitter is absolutely essential for me for hurricane coverage because over the last five or six years I’ve curated a list of meteorologists of hurricane scientists of anyone who does work vaguely related to hurricanes, so when hurricane season starts, this is how I know. Should I be watching this thing? What are the models showing? What are the scientists talking about? It’s where I pick up the conversation on specific topics.”

While some of the participants have shared that they will occasionally use social media to promote their stories, a lot of the reported use was what could be considered a more passive use, not posting or sharing comments and opinions. Heather, for example, follows this pattern:

“I’m usually using social media more to look at and for information gathering purposes, kind of like get up to date on what the latest thing is that happened, maybe more broadly on my beat... But I wouldn’t say that I’m posting on social media.”

The idea of using social media for monitoring was something repeated enough to become a theme for the findings. However, it is also worth it to showcase that a couple of the participants had a controversial perspective. Adam, for example, states that he does his research and rarely relies on social media. Similarly, Barry also says that he prefers to get most of what he reports from other sources rather than social media. Another thing worth mentioning is that many of the participants can see how social media can be beneficial, but they also explore some of the flaws in this setting.

Downsides to Social Media Use

Similarly to understanding social media as a useful tool, many of the participants equally talked about some problems with being inserted into this setting. Again, this theme showed no major differences between how different roles may perceive social media, meaning that environmental journalists associated with both the advocate and the interpretive roles have similar perspectives on this issue.

Liam was one of the participants who highlighted how some things are different now compared to a few years ago when it comes to using social media for work. First, he explained that Twitter, a very commonly used social media amongst journalists, was a part of his routine:

“I would use it as a kind of a tool to stay up to date on what's going on. So as a consumer of news, I would use it to kind of understand what was happening on my beat, but then I would also use it to find sources or do call outs to, find interview subjects, or just gather information about whatever story I was working on.”

After stating how useful this tool was, Liam went ahead to explain why he does not use social media as frequently.

“It's so different now than what it was, just like a few four or five years ago. It used to be like a really great, supportive, helpful place, and then something changed, and now it's not that anymore, to the point where I got to get out of there... all the changes that happened after that, it's just sort of it became a degraded place to be. And you're having to like weed out all the crap to get to something that's actually good and at a certain point you're like “I don't want to weed through the crap anymore.”

Other participants feel the same way about social media, and some of them are more directly on X (Twitter). Barry believes that promoting online does not always have the expected return, and that it is not useful for finding information. He states that:

“Other people use it as a tool, and they promote themselves on using social media, and they promote their work. I tend not to do that. I found that I've never really gotten a lot of responses. And I also think that since X (Twitter) was bought by Elon Musk that you end up sifting through all kinds of garbage on there. And I found that it wasn't productive [...] I don't really use social media that much.”

Another complaint from the environmental journalists around social media use is how time-consuming it can be to dedicate themselves to this activity. Some of them even touched on the idea of creating a brand from themselves to have a more dedicated audience. However, for the most part, they touched on this idea by explaining that it is hard to create a brand online as an environmental journalist; it is some kind of effort that not all of them can make. Mary used to be in the marketing field before transitioning to environmental journalism, and she explains how it requires a lot of maintenance to build a brand on social media, and how it can be exhausting and a lot to navigate. She also brings her perspective about having to be active on social media:

“I'm sure I should do that, but I think I've also just been so overworked and underpaid. I know some people deal with that by brand building, but I think I've been dealing with that by just making a pretty conscious decision that I'm not going to make brand building the main way [...] I don't have time to do all the things, like I don't have time to go be an Instagram influencer. I don't have time to figure out TikTok. I don't have time to look pretty, so I can make a TikTok.”

Other participants, like Mary, also mentioned how it can be challenging to write stories and worry about promoting them online. Bradley, for example, talked about the pressure of using social media for his work and decided to use it less: “I just got burnt out on social media and the treadmill effect of always feeling like you have to be online and posting.”

Surprisingly, many of the environmental journalists interviewed expressed not feeling a lot of pressure from their news organizations to post their stories on social media. For some of them, this comes from a place where the organization has someone especially dedicated to working on social media, promoting the stories and the organization. Mary, however, is a freelance writer, and while she expresses herself, she does not have time to put effort into social media work; she understands how it can be important in her field. Heather, on the other hand, is a journalist within an organization that has someone dedicated to the marketing aspect of it, but she still contributes to this discussion by explaining how challenging it can be to balance reporting on environmental issues and using social media. She states:

“As a journalist who is also very busy and trying to juggle social media with reporting, I still think we should be thinking about it and have it be a part of our workflow. I do think some of that responsibility, though, depends on administration and news leaders in order to help us be able to incorporate that and give us the support needed... I think that journalists are obviously capable of creating their social posts and all of that sort of thing. I do enjoy it. But a lot of times, I just don't have time to do it as well as other stories. So, I think it's also important to have that separate staff report that is staff support. So I do think that it's partially the responsibility of the journalist, but I also think it's the responsibility of the news organizations and making sure that we have other staff to be able to do that too.”

As mentioned earlier, for the sample of this study, the environmental journalists do not feel pressured by the news organizations to promote their stories online, but it is still something they consider doing, although on a smaller scale than other social media uses, for example. Some of them will post the link to their stories on their professional profiles without using a lot of marketing strategies, but others may think that sharing content online is not a priority or something that will make a lot of difference to their numbers. Briefly mentioned before, Barry explained that he did not think promoting on Twitter was productive. He also mentioned that although recognizing that some people use social media for promoting, he never really got a lot of responses from it. Julie also does not consider it a priority to post her stories online, especially when the organization she is working for also does this job. “I try to post the day they come out (the stories) to put them up right away. If that doesn't happen, sometimes I don't. I don't do it sometimes. The publication I'm writing for does it, and I will retweet it or share it.”

Roles and Social Media

As mentioned previously, defining the environmental journalists in only the interpretive or advocate roles has been challenging for this study. After looking at the data multiple times and trying to create reliable coding, it was possible to classify the participants as more inclined to the advocate or interpretive role. Since some participants demonstrated characteristics of both roles, the classification was made based on the answers to some questions and an overall discourse analysis. Considering that, for most of the themes found presented so far, a journalist assigned role did not seem to have a lot of influence on how they would understand some topics. For example, with the benefits of social media, journalists on both sides presented similar perspectives.

However, one of the findings related to social media use was that their main role does not seem to have that much of an influence on how they act online. Heather, for example, is an environmental journalist who could be classified in the advocate role because of some of her statements, such as:

“Me personally, I view my role as an environmental reporter to be reporting in a way that leans more toward being protective of the environment, and like the risks of harming our environment, and how what we do to the environment affects our health. So, I feel like inherently, in that it's sort of like already sort of semi-biased or has like a very clear angle or purpose of what it might be for. I think that my job as an environmental reporter is to be more of a voice speaking to the problems that we're causing to nature. So I mean, if that's advocacy, then yeah, I think that that's totally fine.”

Even though Heather could be classified as more inclined to the advocate role, this does not mean she shares her opinions more freely online. As a freelancer, she worries about not being able to find a job if she shares some of her stronger opinions around the environmental beat on social media, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Similarly, Barry also chooses not to post a lot on social media, especially sharing his personal opinions on something, based on his company's guidelines for social media use. However, unlike Heather, Barry is more inclined to the interpretive role. Quotes such as this one were used to understand his inclination:

“Journalists should not be using social media to express their passionate opinions about the things they cover [...] My job is strictly not to be an advocate. I don't think that journalists are serving any purpose by advocating for what they're writing about. I think that it ultimately undermines what we do.”

Heather and Barry are just one of the examples of how, even though they understand their roles as environmental journalists differently, one as an advocate and the other as an interpreter of scientific information, they both have very similar social media use for different reasons. So, when trying to answer the proposed research questions about how environmental journalists perceive their roles regarding their social media use, the answer is that the roles analyzed do not seem to influence significantly how environmental journalists act online. Although the roles do not seem to relate to social media use directly, it is important to highlight a final finding related to how the environmental journalists' conceptions of roles can be related to how many years of experience they have in the industry.

Different Generations, Different Roles

One interesting finding from the interviews was that the number of years working in the environmental journalism field could dictate which of the two roles the participants would be more inclined to. The participants were asked how long they had been working with environmental issues for demographic purposes. The data resulted in two groups: those with more experience with at least 20 years focusing on this beat, and those with a maximum of 15 years working as environmental journalists. While analyzing participants' answers to classify them as more inclined to advocates or interpreters, it was possible to notice that those with more years in the industry were more aligned with the objective/interpreter perspective. On the other hand, those who are more recent, getting out of college and going into this field, are more aligned with an advocate perspective.

This idea was briefly touched on when discussing the theme of objectivity as a myth. Brian, a journalist for more than 30 years and more inclined to the interpretive role, talked about how he can see himself in the "old school" journalism, still believing in complete objectivity.

Anthony, with 5 years working in this beat and more inclined to the advocate role, is more open to the idea that objectivity, especially in this field, is a concept that needs to be challenged.

Following that idea, Chris, another environmental journalist with more than 30 years of experience, is more inclined to take on the interpretive role. When stating his perspective on this nuance, he also addresses this idea of older journalists perceiving this matter differently than younger ones:

“As a traditional journalist, I am old school. Things may be different now in journalism school, but back in my day, journalists were taught to be impartial and to keep their opinions out. Today, there's a lot more opinion journalism that's a whole long story that goes beyond the scope of your project, but generally I am reluctant to, you know, just to share my opinions.”

Although for the most part, there were no significant differences between younger and older social media use, Brian perceives that the younger generation of journalists is more open online. He says that:

“You have newer, younger journalists who think differently, behave differently, and use social media a lot differently. I know people who are young reporters, and they will get on social media and go, ‘what's the governor think he's doing?’, and I'm like, ‘are you asking that question so that everyone will answer or are you asking the governor?’. I just can't believe how people get out there and say things, but that's just the way they function.”

More than the actual social media use, it is possible to see that younger journalists are more inclined to the advocate role simply by the notion of showing that this is an important topic for them, that they care deeply, and that they are trying to make other people care. More than the

journalists with more years in the field, they are not trying to hide completely that they are humans with interests and passions. As we have seen through this chapter, although they may have advocacy in their discourse, they are still not trying to portray any biases in their stories or on social media. However, they are conscious about their roles as journalists, and they recognize some of their advocacy, but they just choose not to display it for many different reasons that were covered at the beginning of this chapter.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

In contemporary discourse, environmental issues, particularly climate change and its far-reaching implications, have gained significant prominence, necessitating critical examination of journalistic practices in environmental reporting. Environmental journalists serve as key information mediators on matters directly affecting public welfare, warranting scholarly investigation into their professional practices and how their perceived journalistic roles potentially shape these practices. This research specifically examines online journalistic behaviors, a focus justified by evidence that approximately half of American adults consume news through social media platforms at least occasionally (Liedke & Wang, 2023) and by the documented trend of journalists utilizing various digital platforms to disseminate content and expand their audience reach (Johnson et al., 2019). The framework used to better understand the phenomenon of environmental journalists using social media for their work was a combination of Role Theory and Journalistic Roles. Both are related to understanding that people will act and conduct their work based on how they perceive they are expected to (Hanitzsch, 2018). Based on this framework and the literature review, this study proposed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do environmental journalists perceive their interpretive role in relation to their use of social media for work?

RQ2: How do environmental journalists perceive their advocacy role in relation to their use of social media for work?

This chapter analyzes the findings and understands what they mean for environmental journalism and society. We discuss key implications, possible conclusions to draw from the data, the study's limitations, and recommendations for future work.

Key Findings and Implications

Environmental journalists' social media use

The interview results indicate that journalistic roles influence environmental journalists' understanding of social media but do not necessarily change their actions. As we saw in Chapter 4, journalists more inclined to the advocate or interpretive roles are reluctant to use social media to express their opinions. They use social media primarily to monitor for news, gather what is happening in the field, occasionally promote their new stories, and do some networking. These findings align with some previous studies on journalists' social media use, such as the one conducted by Broersma and Graham (2013), where they described that journalists use the affordances online to promote their work, to report, collect data, and gather sources.

Focusing on the promoting aspect of social media, it is interesting to highlight that the participants did not feel pressured by their companies to share content online. This finding contradicts Johnson et al.'s (2019) idea that new organizations try to encourage journalists to share the links to their stories on social media platforms. However, Johnson's study comes from a broader perspective of journalism, which may explain the differences in the findings. Many of the environmental journalists interviewed stated that their companies hire someone specially to work on sharing stories online. This data shows that many environmental journalists are not expected to have a presence online, which can result from their niche work. This result could represent this study's sample, where most interviewees were part of big companies with someone dedicated to social media. This could result from a shift in the field, with news organizations

recognizing that there is limited time to cover environmental issues while contributing to social media. Therefore, they will not ask their employees to do that task.

Since their organizations did not push them to post online, many participants chose to do so because they perceived it as applicable. On the other hand, most participants do not put much effort into this activity, as it is not a priority for them. Considering Role Theory's ideas, this may also represent that environmental journalists do not see being active on social media as a relevant society's expectation. For many of the interviewees, they would leave the hard work of sharing and promoting stories online to the organization. This finding implies that even though environmental journalists recognize that social media can be a good tool for their work, they do not want to feel obligated to use it. They often use it to gather and monitor for news rather than actively posting. Although some participants mentioned feeling the need to establish a personal brand online, most still prioritize other aspects of journalism. They will concentrate more on making the stories appealing rather than on the social media posts.

In fact, among the environmental journalists interviewed, only a few reported attempting to make their social media posts attractive and considering marketing strategies to enhance their publications. Some of them addressed how this process can be time-consuming. For many of them, when they decide to share one of their stories or something related to the field, there is not much thought in this process besides using the affordances of social media, such as images and links. This finding adds to the Vos et al. (2023) study that explores journalists incorporating marketing strategies into their work, but at the same time, it represents how this may work differently in the field of environmental journalism. While they seem aware of marketing principles, the participants do not make a significant effort to use and explore them, other than simply choosing interesting images to attract the audience's attention. Although some roles may

overlap, as seen during the data analysis, the journalistic roles as structures of meaning help us understand why environmental journalists would not want to dedicate themselves to learning strategic social media practices. As they make sense of their profession through journalistic roles, the idea of being marketers may not fit well with their perceived roles.

In this field, environmental journalists may appear less focused on promotion compared to other beats. One implication of this could be the nature of the field itself. During the interviews, a couple of journalists mentioned that most people interested in this topic are already actively seeking out related articles. They reflected on how challenging it might be to reach a different audience that does not typically engage with environmental topics, even through social media reach. As an example, when asked a follow-up question about whether he thought social media was beneficial to increase access to his news, Chris, more inclined to the interpreter role, answered:

“Yeah, I think it does, as to how much I do not know, because I think that most of the people who are going to read most of the environmental journalism are going to read it because they are interested. I tend to think people will still look at the publications or the websites, if they want to, and maybe not so much on social media. I see it as being sort of an addendum”.

Therefore, some environmental journalists may not invest much effort in social media promotion due to its niche field. Various interviews showed that they would only post more actively online due to unspoken expectations in this field. As explored earlier, many Americans will get news sometimes from social media (Liedke & Wang, 2023). Considering that, environmental journalists might see it as essential to post on social media occasionally to meet the audience where they are. It could be implied that they are posting and trying to promote their

stories, just in case they reach more people, but not as if they are counting on it. Many participants explored how thinking more thoroughly before posting can be time-consuming. However, a few also reported that, since it is free to use social media, they would not lose anything by just trying to promote their stories.

By looking at these findings and how the different journalistic roles could influence the decision to post something or not, environmental journalists could put more effort into the promotion aspect of social media, depending on their perceived roles. For example, journalists more inclined to the advocate role might feel a bigger desire to try to reach an audience that does not care about these topics or an influential audience for the topic (e.g., policymakers, nonprofit watchdog groups, etc.). This would be a characteristic of the advocate role, trying to make more people aware of environmental problems because they care about them and want others to care or act. However, it is crucial to emphasize that climate change and other environmental issues represent urgent global challenges that transcend selective interest groups. These topics merit universal attention, as they directly impact collective safety and well-being. While this study does not aim to evaluate which journalistic role—advocate or interpreter—adopts the more appropriate social media approach, it acknowledges potential differences in underlying motivations. Interestingly, despite theoretical distinctions in their professional orientations, both advocate and interpreter journalists in this sample demonstrated similar social media behaviors, suggesting that role conception may influence intentions without necessarily manifesting in distinctly different online practices.

Journalistic roles and practices online

Different studies around journalistic roles show that different roles may dictate journalists' values, ideas, and possibly their practices (Mellado, 2019). This study proposed to

analyze how much influence the journalistic roles could have on social media actions, something not deeply explored in the literature. However, with the two roles explored in this study and with the sample used, there was no significant difference between those more inclined to the advocate role and those more inclined to the interpretive role of social media use. This finding could be understood as confirmation and an addition to Mellado and Dalen's (2013) study on the gap between role conceptions and performances. The researchers surveyed Chilean journalists to understand their role conceptions, and they performed a content analysis on news stories written by these journalists to see what roles were portrayed in the stories. They identified differences between role perceptions and actual performance, concluding that although role conception affects news content, external constraints frequently hinder journalists from realizing their professional ideals (Mellado & Dalen, 2013).

For this study, the participants did not self-declare their perceived roles. Instead, it was attributed to them based on the themes and discourse of the interviews collectively (for a comparison factor) and evidence from within their individual interview. But still, it is possible to imply that their performances did not match their roles' expectations. Since there is not much research on role enactment on social media, it is hard to clearly establish the expectations. However, as approached before, the main idea was that those more inclined to the advocate role would use their advocacy to be more vocal on social media and try to reach a bigger or 'the right' audiences to share their values on environmental issues. Therefore, it may be understood that the gap between role conceptions and performances on Mellado and Dalen's (2013) may also apply to social media performances. This implies that since the role conceptions and performances are different, predicting how specific roles will behave online is complicated.

Moreover, the findings made it possible to understand that some factors influence social media behavior more than journalistic roles. Some of these factors were fear of losing credibility, fear of losing sources, and safety issues. We can imply that this finding relates deeply to environmental journalism and its political nature, especially in today's polarized world. During the interviews, some journalists touched briefly on this aspect, explaining how if you advocate or report on environmental issues, some people will accuse you of being affiliated with a political party. Often, this accusation will come with judgment towards the journalist. This is an important discussion because it reflects the current scenario in America. The United States has a political divide that has been widening over the last years, with evidence that the polarization is growing since 2016 (Schoenmueller et al., 2022). Looking specifically at social media, Schoenmueller et al. (2022) address in their study how Twitter can be understood as a platform for vocalizing preferences, values, and political ideals, which highlights the polarization more clearly. Considering this scenario, would it be possible for environmental journalists to express themselves more if it were a different political setting? The findings show that, more than individual decisions, this issue needs to be addressed in a bigger context of press freedom and power imbalances.

However, beyond political reasons for not expressing themselves online, environmental journalists may also be influenced by their roles, which are shaped by years of experience in the field. The definition of old and young can be very ambiguous, but looking at environmental journalists' years of experience in the field, it was possible to see a difference in how journalists with more years working in the beat see themselves apart from journalists with less experience. From the interviews, it is possible to imply that those with more than twenty years of experience working within the field are more inclined to the interpreter role and objective ideas. On the

other hand, those who have more recently come out of journalism school are inclined to the advocate role.

Experience in the field as a factor

One of the implications of this finding is that there may have been a shift in how objectivity is discussed in journalism school. This newer generation of professionals is more open to discussing that complete objectivity may be a myth, and a challenge to accomplish. Although we could not find significant research related to this idea in the environmental field, there has been research that analyzes the differences between journalists' generations. When studying journalism students in Britain and the Netherlands, Broersma and Singer (2021) found that even though the students consider it important to know how to use new tools, they will often use them in the traditional confines of journalism. The study goes further to explain that this new generation of journalists understands the need for change, mostly adapting to the use of digital technologies, but they do not become disruptive innovators (Broersma & Singer, 2021).

The similarity in both studies is around the idea that younger journalists will think differently from older generations, but still have similar behaviors. Considering this, these environmental journalists with fewer years of experience are choosing to recognize they have personal biases and personal opinions instead of trying to portray themselves as a vessel for objectivity. However, they recognize they are not free of judgment while they make an effort not to let that judgment influence their writing. When it comes to the social media aspect, these younger journalists are more inclined to advocate and are more open to sharing opinions online if they understand it as a safe place. This means they would feel more comfortable posting environmental-related opinions around, possibly policies and government decisions, if they had steadier jobs and there was no risk of losing sources or being a target online.

On the other hand, from the interview's data, it looked like even if the conditions were different, older journalists and more inclined to the interpretive role would still not share personal opinions on social media, regardless of the scenario. Even with more freedom, the idea is that the same journalistic norms they use to write their stories, such as not showing personal traces, are also present in the online setting. This topic brings an interesting discussion about how different generations conduct journalistic work. This matters to understand better how these professionals see their roles in the environmental discussion and possibly act on it. This study does not intend to understand which side is correct, but understanding the current scenario matters to future environmental journalists and journalism curriculum construction.

Should environmental journalists be labeled advocates?

It is also interesting to understand how personal beliefs are reflected in journalism writing and social media use. A key finding from this study regarding advocacy discussions is that many participants understand that when a journalist covers environmental issues, it indicates they care about it. However, other participants would not see the environment as different from other fields. These journalists expressed their frustration by stating that they could report on other topics and not be called advocates, so why, when they address environmental issues, are they automatically labeled?

As explored in the literature, advocacy journalism can be understood as promoting political and social causes (Charles, 2019). This term can be applied to different fields of journalism. However, it is also heavily used in the environmental beat. As mentioned above, some participants do not understand why environmental journalists would be classified as advocates for reporting on related issues. This is an interesting discussion in the field, but there is no clear answer. It can be implied that the main difference between this beat and others is the

nature of the content itself; it is a topic that, for many years now, people have adopted as a cause rather than solely a topic area. Also, as mentioned previously, a particular political nature is attached to it, which polarizes the discussion even more. Because of this polarization, just by bringing up such topics, it may look like the journalist is promoting the cause instead of reporting on it.

Advocacy continuum

However, another important thing to add to this discussion is how flexible the notions of advocacy can be. For this study, participants were classified as more inclined to advocate or interpretive roles, with less experienced journalists leaning more towards advocacy and more experienced journalists leaning more towards the interpretive role. One of the reasons why it can be hard to do this classification is that advocacy can be seen as a spectrum. Through the analysis of interviews, Fisher (2016) argued that every journalism work falls along a continuum of advocacy, from small decisions to big ones. This idea was previously mentioned in this study, but Fisher (2016) understands that even subtle elements of journalism production, such as voices and perspectives, whether intended or not, are forms of advocacy.

Since advocacy can be understood as the verbal support or argument for a cause, journalists are seen as advocates just by providing a vehicle to spread the message (Fisher, 2016). Again, this discourse is even more present in environmental journalism, possibly because of the nature of the stories. This translates to social media where environmental journalists, regardless of their roles' conceptions, refrain from adding personal posts on environmental issues, as simply highlighting these matters could be interpreted as advocacy. This finding could be seen as an important way to understand why environmental journalists act the way they do online.

Social media offers ways to reach more people about climate change impacts and solutions, but one should not quickly judge environmental journalists who choose not to use these platforms. The research shows that many factors beyond journalistic roles influence social media use. This finding has important implications for journalism education. For example, one participant mentioned being encouraged by a professor to post on social media. However, since environmental journalism has unique challenges, journalism schools might need to develop more targeted approaches that account for these specific factors when teaching about social media use. The factors identified in this study can help create better recommendations for environmental journalism education. Another important implication from the findings is how the concept of advocacy could be approached differently. As explored, advocacy can be understood differently depending on who is asked, but it will often come attached to a negative connotation for the environmental journalism field. Even when challenging the concept of objectivity, journalists with less years of experience, those more inclined to take on the advocacy role, still do not like to affirm that they are advocates openly. During the interviews, they explained the importance of talking about the environment and how they chose this field because they are interested in and care about it. A present underlying discourse was that they want to inform people about environmental issues, so they could be aware and possibly make changes, even though they would not be explicit about this. This finding relates to Daily's (2022) thesis, where she also interviewed environmental journalists to understand more about this topic. Daily (2022) found that journalists would still not label themselves as advocates even when showing personal passion about finding solutions to environmental problems and trying to keep the planet safe. Participants also recognized that the concepts of advocacy, objectivity, and solutions reporting are continually evolving (Daisy, 2022).

This research contributes to existing literature by confirming previous findings while adding insights about social media practices. In digital spaces, journalists experience greater freedom to express opinions than in their formal reporting. However, concerns about being categorized as advocates often limit their social media activity, frequently restricting posts to sharing published stories, and even this is approached cautiously. These findings suggest the need to reconsider the concept of advocacy within environmental journalism, potentially normalizing certain advocacy practices. If advocacy is narrowly defined as presenting only one perspective, journalists' reluctance to associate with the term is understandable. However, when considered as demonstrating concern for environmental causes, it raises important questions about why environmental journalists should not work toward mitigating climate change impacts and benefiting communities. This discussion holds significance not only for journalism professionals but also for the general public. Understanding how environmental journalists perceive and enact their professional roles on social media platforms encourages critical reflection on current practices and identifies potential areas for development within the field. By trying to answer the research questions on how environmental journalists perceive their interpretive and advocate role concerning their use of social media for work, we were able to find key things about this field and add to the literature. The main finding was that different roles do not make a significant change in how environmental journalists use social media. They perceive their roles differently and may have different intentions around social media, but when it comes to enactment, both advocates and interpreters will have similar habits. A noteworthy finding reveals that journalists with less time working in the field demonstrate a greater inclination toward the advocate role; despite their continued adherence to traditional journalistic norms, they recognize the evolving challenges to conventional notions of objectivity. They

understand that before being environmental journalists, they are humans with biases and personal beliefs, but they will try not to portray those in their stories or social media use. On the other hand, journalists with more years in the field are firmer and more inflexible about being objective; they believe that even within the social media setting, the journalistic norms are still in play.

Limitations

After presenting the findings and understanding their implications for the field and its importance, it is also important to discuss some of this study's limitations. First, while interviews are an exemplary method for understanding people's opinions and experiences and contextualizing those in broader societal phenomena, they have limitations, such as trusting that everything the interviewees say is true. Given the nature of this topic, without sensitive or embarrassing content, there is a belief that participants will be truthful about their experiences. However, how individuals document their experiences might not always accurately represent the reality of those situations. For example, for the social media use questions, the participants were asked which platforms they use, how often, and why. All these answers would depend on the participant's memory and, therefore, could be flawed. This represents a chance of finding a different result if we look at the participants' social media accounts.

While absolute factual accuracy is not necessarily the primary concern in qualitative research, as it is the journalists' perceptions and interpretations of their experiences that form the phenomena under investigation, additional methodological approaches could provide complementary insights. A significant methodological limitation concerns the nature of interview-based research when exploring practices that potentially conflict with journalistic norms. While in-depth interviews provide valuable insights into participants' perceptions and

self-reported behaviors, they may not fully capture the nuanced decision-making processes that occur during actual professional practice, particularly regarding advocacy-related behaviors that journalists might be reluctant to acknowledge given their professional training. Ethnographic research methods, including direct observation of journalists' social media activities, content analysis of their posts, examination of their professional networks, and observation of story development processes, could reveal richer insights into how journalistic roles manifest in day-to-day practice. Such methodological approaches might better illuminate the often subtle ways that advocacy orientations influence reporting decisions and social media engagement, potentially uncovering discrepancies between stated intentions and actual behaviors that interviews alone cannot access.

Another possible limitation refers to the sample used for the research. Qualitative research does not want to make generalizations about a topic, but a different group of environmental journalists could result in different findings. With fourteen participants, there was a lot of diversity in the data, but they were still mostly affiliated with the same professional development association and could share similar perspectives.

Future Research

Considering the findings and the study's limitations, there are a few directions for future research that could be explored. First, to better understand environmental journalists' use of social media, it would be interesting to conduct interviews while analyzing their social media posts. This would fill in any gaps between the self-reporting use of social media and the actual enactment. Further research with content analysis would be focused on understanding what kind of environmental-related content gets a better reach online and what are some of the factors

around it. This kind of research would guide future environmental journalists who want to try to reach a bigger audience.

Another future research direction could be understanding the difference between more and less experienced environmental journalists. It could be interesting to investigate if the shift in how the different generations think about advocacy and objectivity happened intentionally or not. Are the current journalism schools encouraging students to challenge the idea of objectivity? Are they being taught differently from older generations because of the advent of social media? Michailidou and Trenz (2021) touch briefly on this discussion by positing that journalists should change how they understand their work in this digital age. While challenging the idea of a post-truth era (where the truth is subjective), the authors argue that journalists should not try to be absolute truth holders, instead, they should mediate the truth in the public sphere, negotiating debates and discussions (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021). Future research should delve deeper into this idea of understanding truth and consequently objectivity differently to try to match society. At the same time, this could also represent a shift in the way environmental issues are discussed in the media. Climate change, for example, is an issue that has only increased in recent years, happening faster than predicted, and something that requires collective action for change (United Nations, 2019). Considering this urgency, this new generation of journalists may be changing how they perceive and approach these topics, which would be an interesting idea for future research to focus on.

Future research should also examine gender-based disparities in social media engagement among environmental journalists. While Finneman et al. (2019) documented social media harassment of female television journalists attempting to establish professional digital identities, the environmental journalism context presents unique challenges warranting focused

investigation. Environmental reporting often addresses politically contentious issues including climate change policy, corporate environmental practices, and regulatory oversight—topics that frequently generate intense public reaction. In this study, participants expressed concerns about compromised credibility, source relationships, and potential doxxing. A gender-focused analysis could explore whether female environmental journalists experience heightened vulnerability to harassment when reporting on controversial environmental issues, particularly those challenging powerful corporate or political interests. Additionally, research might investigate whether gender influences environmental journalists' social media content strategies, engagement with critical responses, or self-protective measures when reporting on climate justice, environmental racism, or corporate accountability. These gender-specific dimensions could significantly enhance our understanding of the professional challenges within environmental journalism's increasingly digital landscape.

Conclusion

This study reveals that environmental journalists' social media practices are shaped by multiple factors beyond their professional roles. Despite theoretical distinctions between advocate and interpreter orientations, both groups demonstrate similar online behaviors, suggesting a disconnect between role conception and enactment. Generational differences emerged as significant, with younger journalists more inclined toward advocacy while still adhering to traditional journalistic norms. Journalists across generations expressed reluctance to share opinions online due to concerns about credibility, source relationships, and safety—particularly in today's polarized political landscape where environmental reporting itself is often perceived as advocacy.

These findings contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions about evolving concepts of objectivity, advocacy, and journalistic norms in environmental journalism. They highlight how the unique nature of environmental topics, urgent global challenges with political dimensions, creates distinct professional challenges. Future research should expand this work through ethnographic methods examining journalists' actual online practices, investigate generational shifts in journalism education, and explore effective digital strategies for environmental content. For journalism education, these insights suggest the need for specialized approaches addressing the field's complex realities, preparing future environmental journalists to navigate digital spaces while effectively serving their crucial informational role in society.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide is structured around establishing comfort sharing, maintaining a natural conversational flow, and addressing the research questions:

RQ1: How do environmental journalists perceive their interpretive role in relation to their use of social media for work?

RQ1: How do environmental journalists perceive their objective role in relation to their use of social media for work?

In case the interviewee spends more time on some questions than expected, and we start to run out of time, the questions marked in grey can be cut without much impact on answering the research questions.

Introduction (5-6 minutes)

Informed Consent Script for Environmental Journalists:

To begin, I would like to thank you for your participation in my research interview. I will be sharing some information regarding your rights as a participant in this research.

As a reminder, my name is Laura Brito, and I'm a graduate student at Colorado State University. Under the supervision of Dr. Abrams, this research will help towards obtaining my master's degree. This research will focus on understanding environmental journalists' perceptions and uses of social media. The goal is to gather rich insights on the experiences, ethical considerations, and opinions shaping environmental journalism in connection with social media. You're eligible to be in this study because you are an environmental journalist, and your perspectives will help me to understand this phenomenon and write research that will help future professionals.

Please understand that all of your correspondence with me is completely confidential and no identifying information will be attached to your data. This includes your name, organization, specific location or any other potentially identifying information. With permission, I'd like to record this interview to refer to the data at later dates after all interviews are completed. This will help me to focus on our conversation in real time, instead of being focused on recording notes. This recording will be transcribed and only used for my analysis; no one else will be able to access it through a password protected computer and hard drive. After data is analyzed, the recording and transcription will be destroyed. Quotes from your interview may be used in reporting the results in aggregate with the other participants, but your name or other identifying information will not be included.

Your cooperation and participation in this interview are completely voluntary. You can discontinue at any time with absolutely no risk or consequence. There are also no anticipated risks involved in this interview. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant, the Colorado State University IRB can be reached at IRB@colostate.edu for any questions related to your participation in this study.

[Ask verbally and acquire a response]

Do you understand what you are being asked to do?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do you agree to participate in the study?

Opening Questions (7-8 minutes)

1. Could you tell me about your journey into environmental journalism?
 - *Probe: What drew you to this specific beat?*
 - *Probe: How long have you been covering environmental issues?*

2. How would you describe your typical workday or week as an environmental journalist?

General Social Media Practice (8-10 minutes)

3. *How does social media fit into your daily or weekly routine?*
 - *Probe: Which platforms do you use most frequently and why?*
 - *Probe: How do you decide what to share or engage with?*
4. How does social media affect the way you explain environmental issues to your audience? Is it something you're considering during the entire process of story selection, research, and development through publishing or does it come to mind at only certain stages?
 - *Probe: Can you give me a specific example?*

Interpretive Role (10-15 minutes)

5. When you are reporting on scientific/environmental issues, do you have specific goals to accomplish when communicating with the audience?
 - *Probe: Are there specific outcomes you expect from your audience?*
 - *Probe: Can you think of any strategies you may use to accomplish these goals?*
6. When covering complex environmental topics, how do you approach making them attractive and accessible on social media, or in thinking about how they might find an audience on social media?
 - *Probe: Could you share a recent example?*
 - *Probe: What challenges do you face in this process?*
7. How do you balance scientific accuracy with engaging storytelling on social media?
 - *Probe: Has your view on this changed over time?*

Advocacy Role (15-20 minutes)

8. How do you see the role of environmental journalists evolving in the social media age?
- *Probe: What new responsibilities or expectations have emerged?*
 - *Probe: How do these changes affect your approach to reporting?*
9. Some journalists feel pressure to take stronger positions on environmental issues, while others emphasize maintaining traditional objectivity. How do you think about this balance?
- *Probe: Has your thinking on this evolved over time?*
 - *Probe: How does the social media context influence this?*
10. When you are online, do you believe the traditional journalistic norms such as impartiality are still in action or do you feel comfortable in expression personal opinions since it is a more unformal setting?
- *Probe: Could you give me an example of a time when you struggled with this balance?*
 - *Probe: How do you differentiate between your professional and personal presence on social media? Do you find they interact – your professional and personal presence or do you fully compartmentalize?*
 - *Probe: Have there been instances where colleagues or your organization have influenced how you approach this?*
11. How would you define and what do you consider to be advocacy in the environmental journalism field?
- *Probe: What do you think of the discussion around environmental journalists being advocates?*

Final Reflection (4-5 minutes)

12. How do you see the relationship between social media and environmental journalism evolving?

- *Probe: What opportunities and challenges do you anticipate?*

Closing (2-3 minutes)

13. Is there anything else you'd like to share or to simply emphasize about your experience with social media and environmental journalism?

Concluding Remarks (1 minute): Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with navigating social media as an environmental journalist ...your insights will really help us understand how this field is evolving. Plus, I'm quite grateful to you for helping me with my graduate thesis research. I'll be analyzing the interviews over the next few months and would be happy to share the findings with you once they're ready: would you like me to email them to you? If you think of anything else you'd like to add or have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to me by email.

Time Estimate for Interview Length: 52 to 68 minutes

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hello Everyone,

My name is Laura, I am a former journalist and now a second-year graduate student in the Journalism and Media Communication Department at Colorado State University. I am working on my thesis titled “How environmental journalists' roles influence their work online.” I am looking for environmental journalists to interview, and I hope you are willing to help.

This research will focus on understanding environmental journalists' perceptions and uses of social media. The goal is to gather rich insights on the experiences, ethical considerations, and opinions shaping environmental journalism in connection with social media.

Your perspectives as an environmental journalist will help me to understand this phenomenon and write research that will help future professionals and drive important conversations in the field. If you decide to help me, you will participate in a confidential interview that will take about an hour. I will conduct the interview online. This is voluntary, you can choose to be in the study or not, and you have the right to withdraw at any time. Please understand that all of your correspondence with me is completely confidential and no identifying information will be attached to your data.

Participants should have at least 2 years of experience in the environmental journalism field and work in the U.S. Would you be interested in participating? If you do, we can go ahead and schedule a time for our interview or if you want more information, please email me at

laura.brito@colostate.edu

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask.

APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL

6/2/25, 8:11 PM

Protocols

PROTOCOLS



COLORADO STATE
UNIVERSITY

The protocol listed below has been approved by the CSU IRB Determinations Fort Collins on Wednesday, February 5th 2025.

PI: Abrams, Katherine M

Submission Type and ID: Initial 6582

Title: How Environmental Journalists' roles influence their work online

Approval Date: Wednesday, February 5th 2025

Expiration Date: no date provided

The CSU IRB (FWA0000647) has completed its review of protocol 6582 How Environmental Journalists' roles influence their work online. In accordance with federal and state requirements, and policies established by the CSU IRB, the committee has approved this protocol under Exempt review.

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under exempt category 2.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in HRP-103 - INVESTIGATOR MANUAL.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

If no expiration date is listed above, continuing review is not required for this study.

<https://colostate.kuali.co/protocols/protocols/67a135bdcc25785838be840d/correspondence/67a3e217b42c59e3f9d93a80>

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